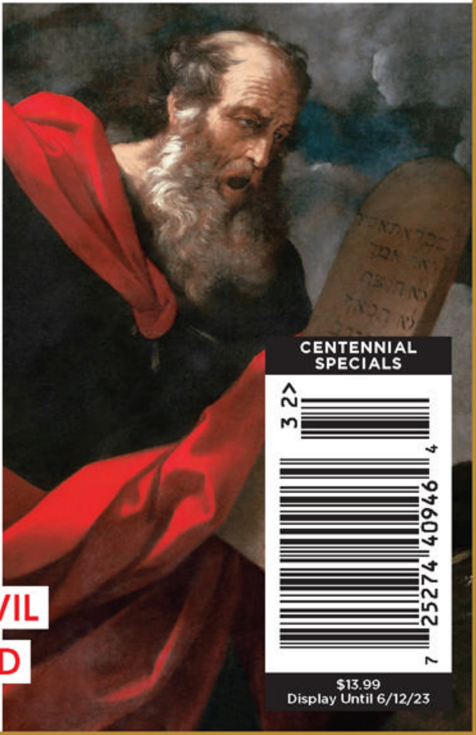
FIGURES OF FAITH

The Old & New Testaments

HEROES OF THE BIBLE

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FROM SCRIPTURE



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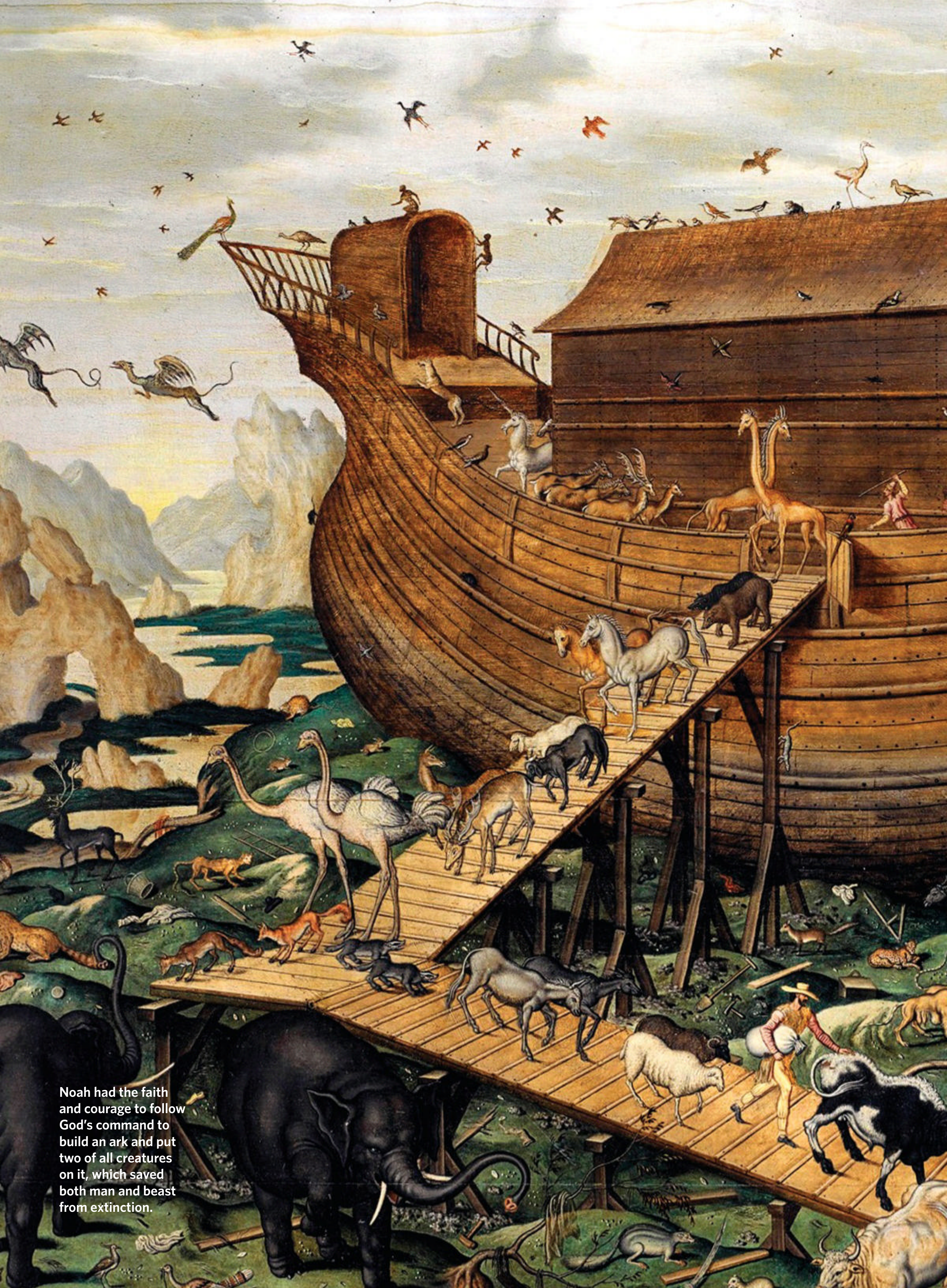
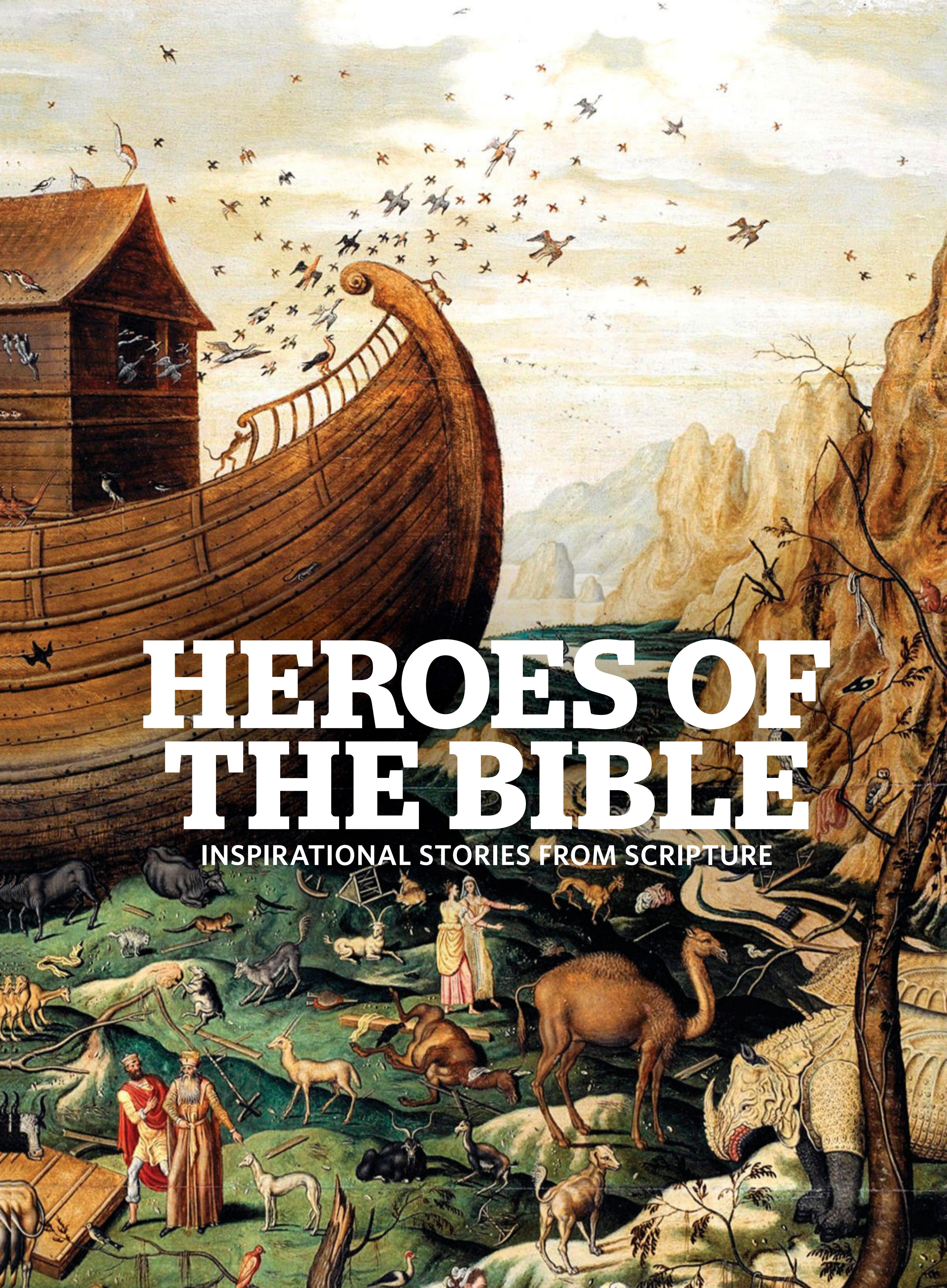


Noah had the faith and courage to follow God's command to build an ark and put two of all creatures on it, which saved both man and beast from extinction.



HEROES OF THE BIBLE

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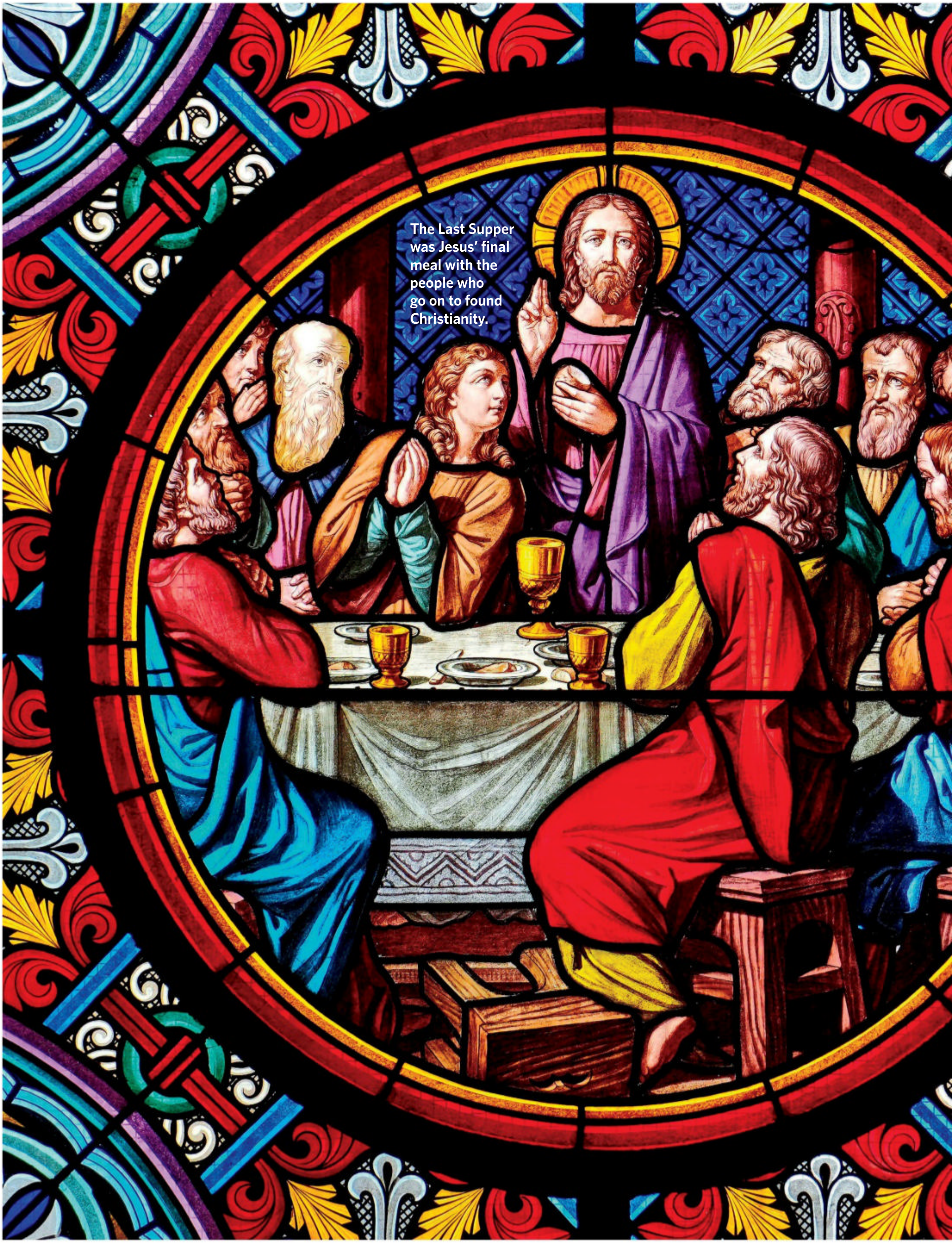

The Last Supper was Jesus' final meal with the people who go on to found Christianity.

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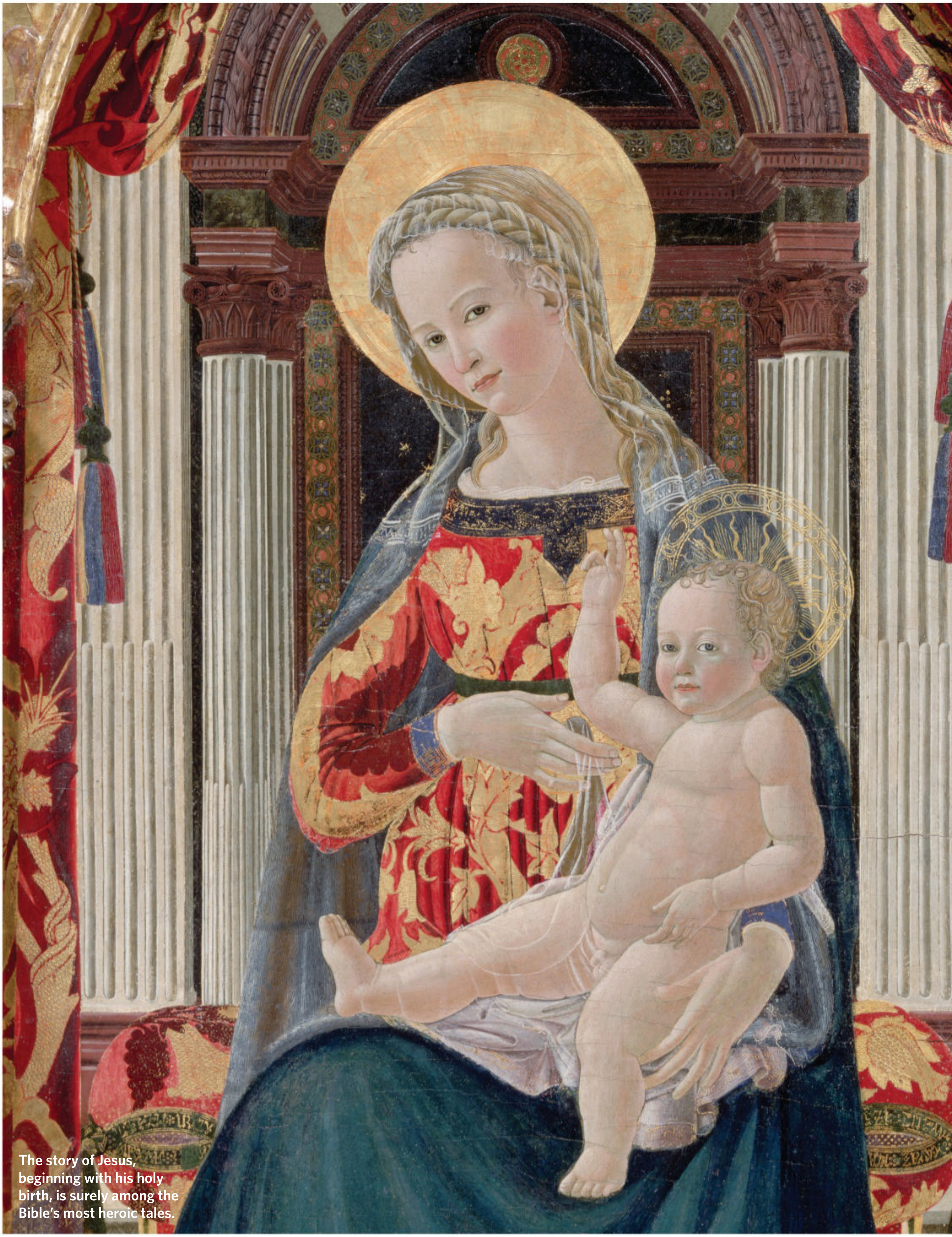


The story of Jesus, beginning with his holy birth, is surely among the Bible's most heroic tales.

Introduction

Our heroes inspire us, lift our spirits and remind us again and again of the amazing feats that human beings are capable of performing. But just what makes someone a hero in the first place? Even a cursory examination of the legends of yore will quickly establish that there is no single, simple answer to that question. Abraham Lincoln, who led our nation through the perils of the Civil War, was certainly a hero. So was Rosa Parks, whose courageous refusal to move to the back of a municipal bus helped to spark the civil rights movement. Another was Albert Einstein, whose law of relativity fundamentally changed our understanding of the universe. Marie Curie, the Wright Brothers, Babe Ruth, Eleanor Roosevelt—heroes all, but very, very different human beings. The heroes of the Bible you will read about in the pages that follow are every bit as diverse as these iconic figures.

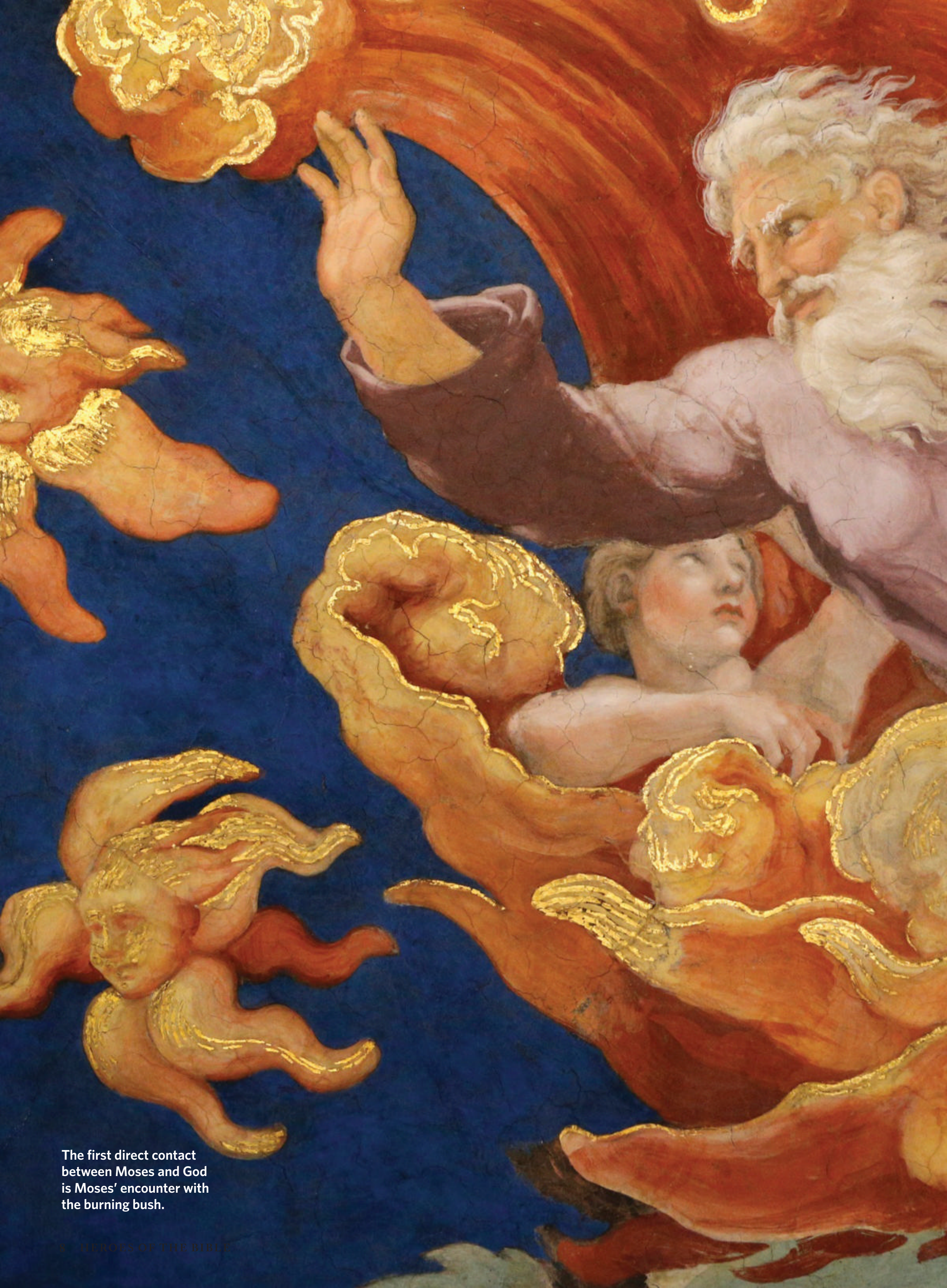
A few fall into the category we most often associate with the term "hero": strong combat-ready warriors, fully prepared to do battle with Israel's enemies. Samson, the prototypical strong man, is of this ilk. Gideon and Joshua, too, and Saul before he succumbed to jealousy and paranoia about the rise of David, were successful and charismatic military leaders who led the Israelites to victory after victory on the battlefield.

But the heroism of many others in the Bible is of a very different order. Several great patriarchs of the Old Testament—Abraham, Jacob and Noah, for example—led their people through great hardship; their heroism was displayed most clearly in their faithful acceptance of God's will, even when outcomes were less than certain. The Blessed Virgin, the mother of Jesus, whose powerful faith enabled her to accept the shocking news of a divine birth with surprising equanimity, must be included in this group as well.

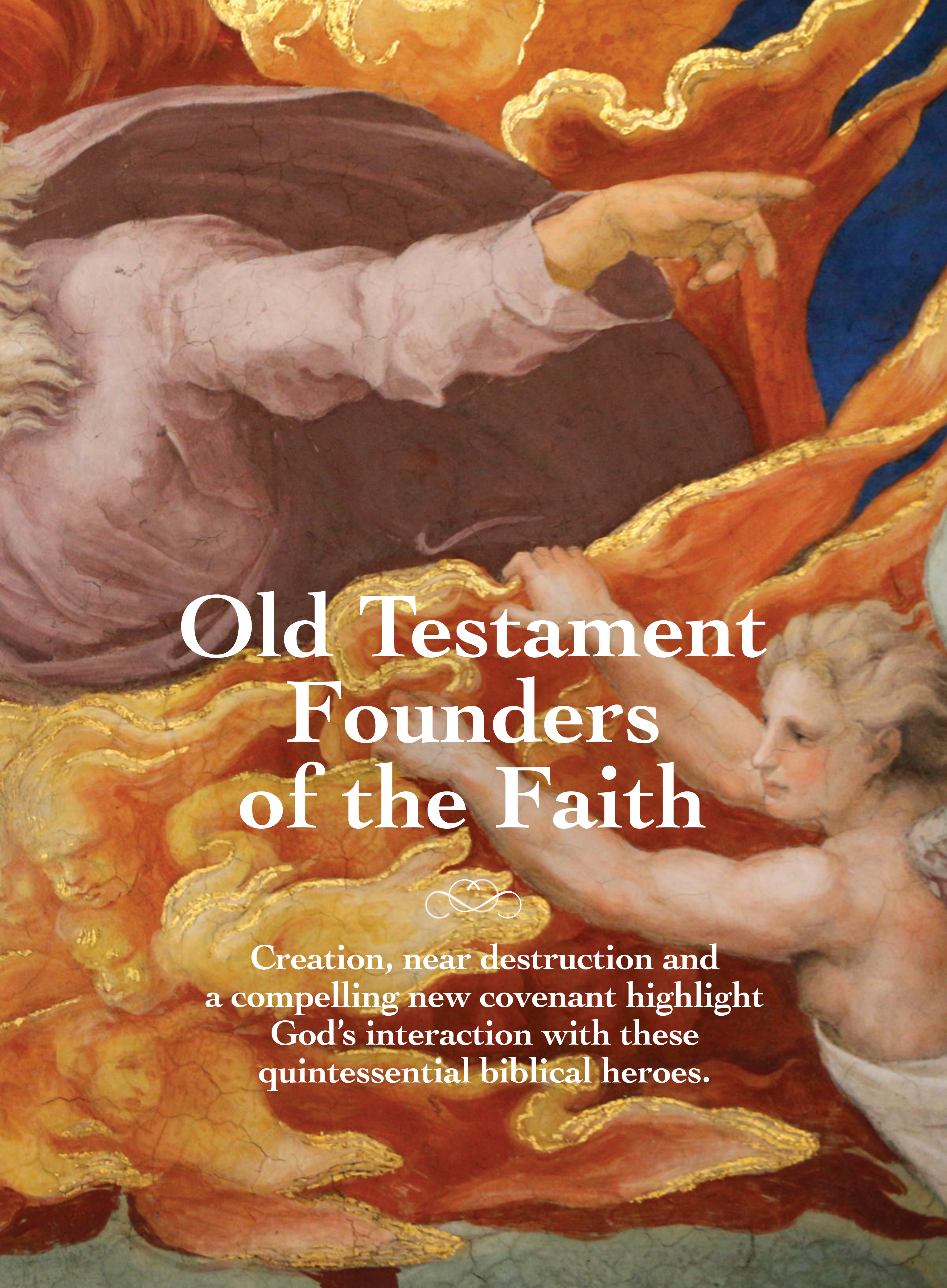
Others displayed their heroism through astute employment of their intelligence. Joseph rose from servitude in Egypt to manage the entire nation; Esther outwitted the evil Haman and saved the Israelites from extinction; Rebekah concocted a clever scheme to ensure that Jacob would inherit the mantle of leadership instead of his less than capable brother, Esau; with his calm and unfailing wisdom, Solomon ushered in perhaps the most stable period in the history of ancient Israel.

A fourth group displayed courageous heroism in speaking out about the corruption in their respective societies. All the great prophets of the Old Testament, most notably Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Nathan, fearlessly called their leaders and wayward fellow Israelites to account while pressing the case for reform. John the Baptist did much the same in the New Testament as he sought to prepare the way for Jesus, the Savior and Messiah, who would follow him. His beheading graphically illustrates the dangers of the prophetic calling.

Finally, we have four heroes—Moses, David, Paul and Jesus—who transcend all the categories. Moses was most assuredly as faithful as the patriarchs of old; he was also clearly an exceptional leader, every bit as charismatic as Joshua and Gideon, who led his people out of captivity in Egypt and held the Israelites together through the desperate years in the wilderness. David displayed great physical courage in his legendary defeat of the much stronger Goliath, and he showed himself to be a talented military leader in his many victories over the enemies of Israel. But he also proved highly intelligent in dealing with the hatred of Saul and eventually establishing a stable monarchy in Israel. Paul was a leader, too, and a founder, who spread the Gospel of Christ far beyond the borders of Israel. He was also a great thinker—as wise as Joseph or Solomon—whose formulations of the emerging Christian faith established the boundaries of Christian theological discourse for thousands of years to come. Then, at last, there is Jesus, hero indeed, but for millions of Christians so much more. Prophet, theologian, healer, miracle-worker, charismatic leader—Jesus was all of these things, and for Christians around the globe he was something even greater: divine.



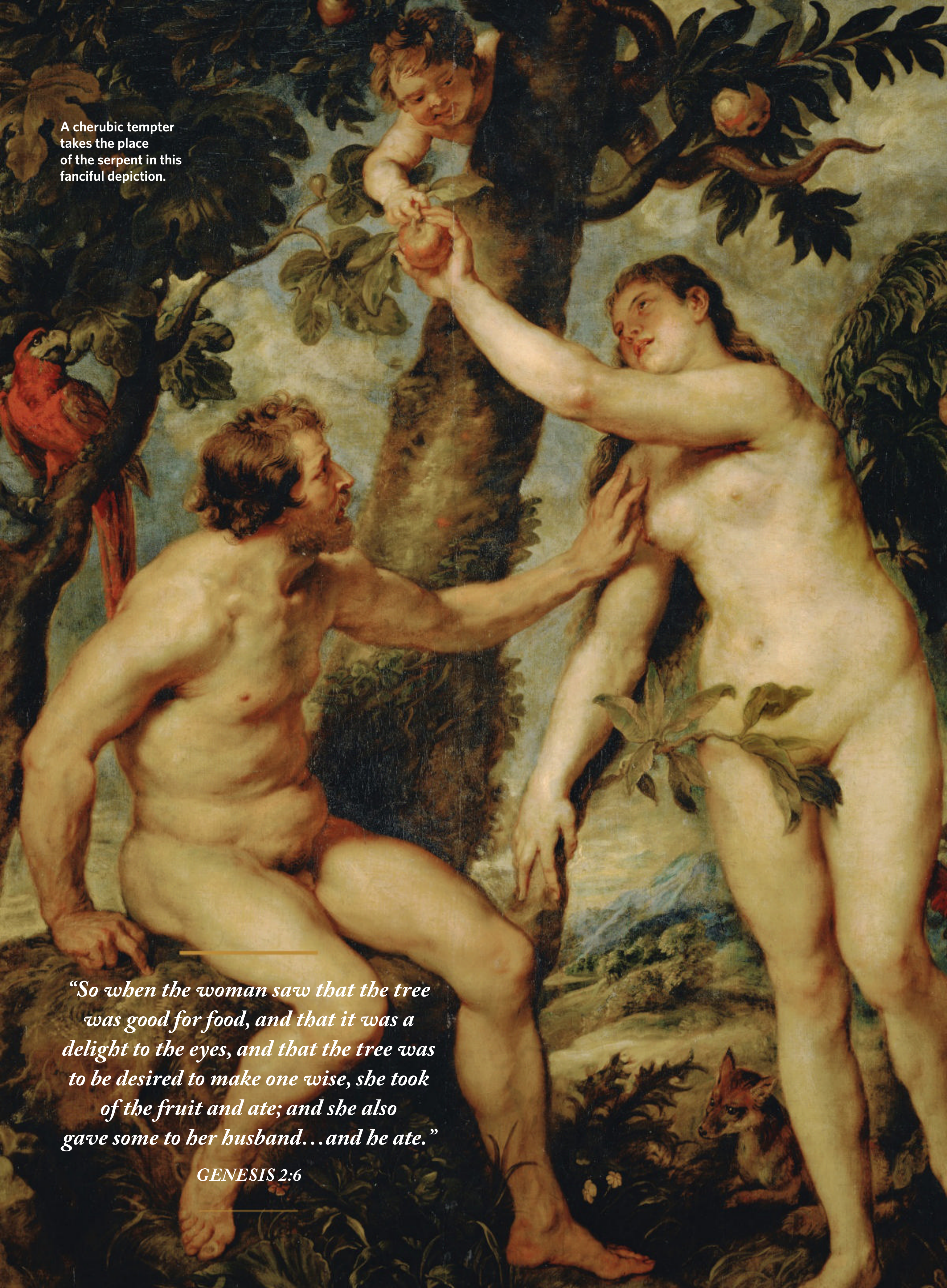
The first direct contact between Moses and God is Moses' encounter with the burning bush.



Old Testament Founders of the Faith

* * *

Creation, near destruction and
a compelling new covenant highlight
God's interaction with these
quintessential biblical heroes.



A cherubic tempter takes the place of the serpent in this fanciful depiction.

> *"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband…and he ate."*
>
> *GENESIS 2:6*

Adam & Eve

First Humans

God creates them in his image, but they are not destined to remain in the Garden of Eden.

The Bible presents these two iconic figures as the founders of the human race, the first man and the first woman, from whom all future generations would derive. Their story has been told and retold countless times through the millennia of human history, but the tale first appears in the Book of Genesis, where two versions of the origin story are presented. In the first, shorter account both figures come into being simultaneously: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Of course, it is the second, more complex narrative in chapter 2 that has captured the human imagination since its first expression. In this account, Adam—the authoritative New Revised Standard Version of the Bible simply calls him "the man," which is the literal translation of adam—comes first, soon followed by "every animal of the field" and "every bird of the air." Alas, none of these wondrous creatures provide a "partner" or "helper" for Adam. So God causes "a deep sleep to fall upon the man"—divine anesthesia?—then removes one of Adam's ribs, from which Eve is formed. Biblical scholars have noted that the non-gender-specific term adam only becomes masculine ("ish") after the creation of Eve, suggesting, as in the simpler account, that the two biological genders formed simultaneously. "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman ['ishah'], for out of Man ['ish'] this one was taken."

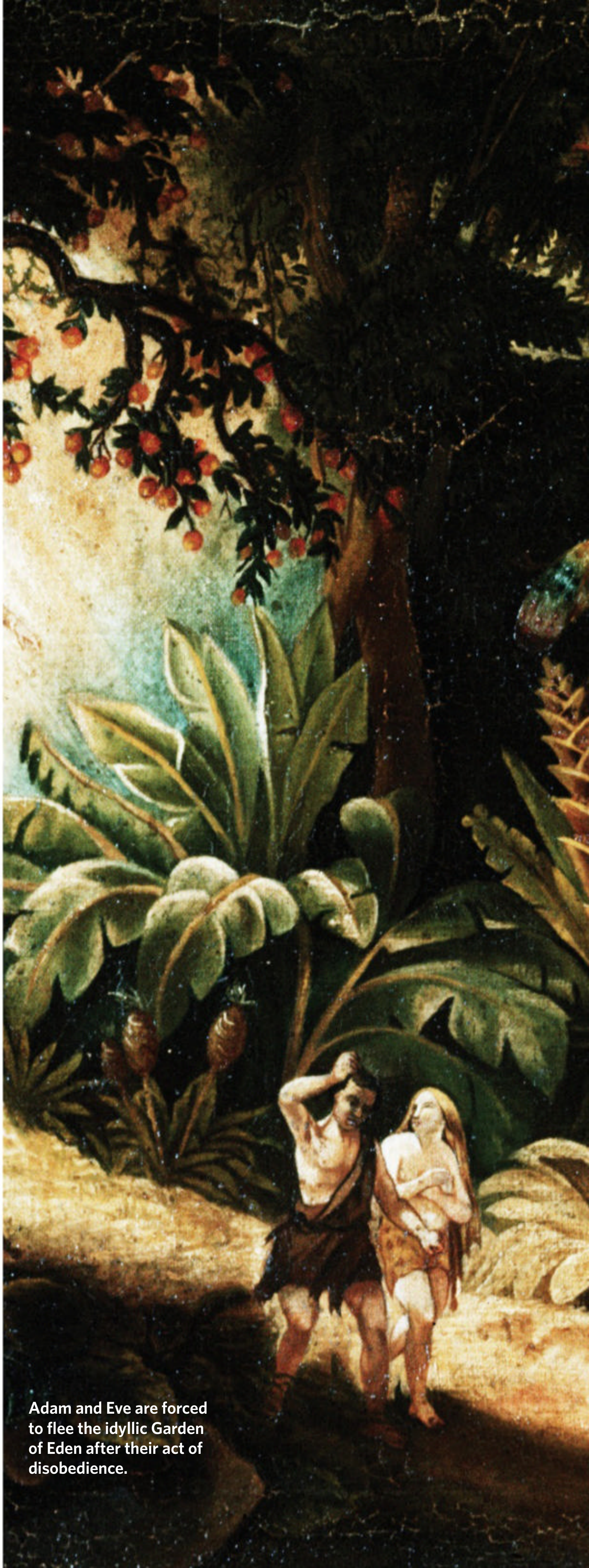
The first couple lives in a state of blissful innocence until the crafty serpent arrives on the scene and tempts Eve to taste the fruit—there is no reference to an apple—growing from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden. "You will not die," the serpent tells Eve, contrary to God's warning; "for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Eve succumbs to temptation, as does Adam soon thereafter. Despite subsequent depictions of Eve as a seductive temptress, there is no evidence that Adam, who apparently was with Eve during her dialogue with the serpent, had any

> ***"They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God."***
>
> ***GENESIS 3:8***

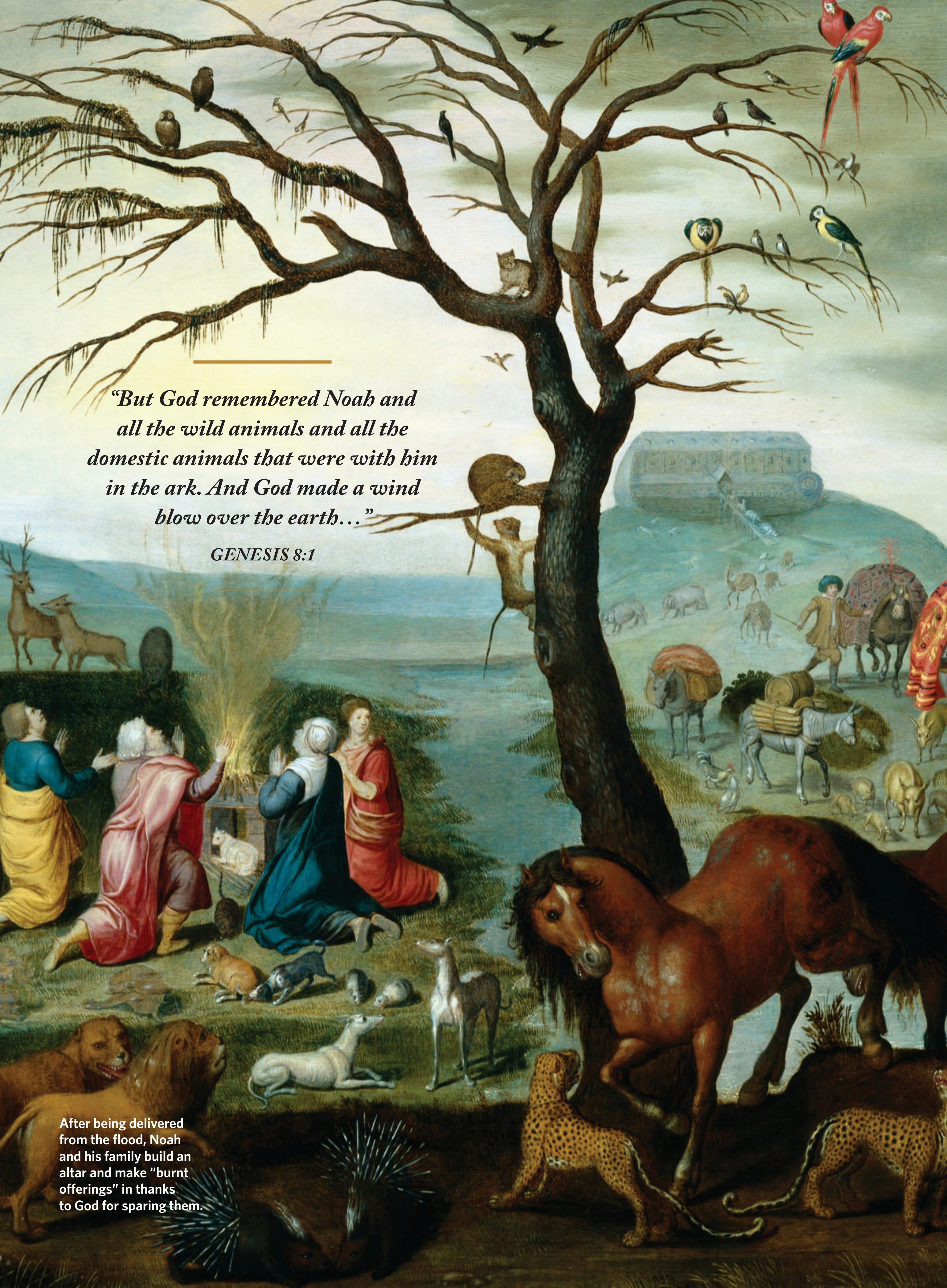
compunction about following suit. The consequences of this act of disobedience follow swiftly. The pair suddenly become aware of their nakedness and create crude clothing to cover themselves. God appears and demands an explanation for their transgression. Adam, hardly a paragon of chivalry, blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent; the serpent offers no excuse. God's verdict is harsh: The serpent is condemned to slither on its belly for the rest of eternity—did the snake have limbs before this?—Eve is doomed to suffer pain in childbirth and be ruled over by her husband, and Adam is forced to till hard and unforgiving soil in an effort to feed himself and his family. After rendering this painful judgment, God forces the couple to flee from the garden, away from paradise and their joyful, though ignorant, relationship with God.

Many Christians have viewed the story as proof of humanity's "original sin," the primal act of disobedience that could only be redeemed by the sacrifice of Jesus many years later. Others have come to see the story as the biblical explanation for human consciousness, for our move from childlike innocence to full personhood, capable of moral reasoning and hence subject to God's judgment. In this interpretation, Adam and, especially, Eve are vital figures in humanity's spiritual development.

The Bible tells us very little about Adam and Eve's later life. We read of two sons, one a farmer (Cain) and another a shepherd (Abel). We learn that Cain murders Abel in a fit of jealousy and is condemned by God to "be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." With one son dead and a second in exile, we can only guess at the couple's joy at the birth of a third son, Seth, whose descendants would include Noah and the rest of humankind.



Adam and Eve are forced to flee the idyllic Garden of Eden after their act of disobedience.



> *"But God remembered Noah and*
> *all the wild animals and all the*
> *domestic animals that were with him*
> *in the ark. And God made a wind*
> *blow over the earth…"*
>
> *GENESIS 8:1*

After being delivered from the flood, Noah and his family build an altar and make "burnt offerings" in thanks to God for sparing them.

Noah

Steadfast Survivor

God chooses this faithful man to ensure the preservation of the human race and every species in the animal kingdom.

If Adam and Eve are the first humans, then Noah, patriarch of the only family to survive a cataclysmic global flood, is the father of humankind. Every child has heard the story: God loses patience with the wickedness of the human race and decides to deliver a massive flood to the earth that will result in the deaths of every human being, with the single exception of Noah, the one righteous man on the planet, and his family. The flood will destroy every living nonhuman creature as well, the exceptions in this case being the animals, one male and one female, of "every kind," which Noah is instructed to bring into his specially-designed ark.

When the time comes for the rains to descend, ever faithful Noah loads up the ark with his wife and his three sons and their three wives, along with "every wild animal of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind." Torrential rains cover the earth for 40 days, with waters rising so much that "all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered," the result being that "all flesh that moved on the earth…were blotted out." Only Noah and the inhabitants of the ark survive. The rains eventually cease, but the waters must subside before the inhabitants of the ark can return to the earth. Noah releases a dove from the ark, but the bird soon returns, indicating that the waters are still too high to allow for habitation. He waits seven days and sends the dove out again; this time it returns with a "freshly plucked olive leaf" in its beak, indicating that the waters have receded dramatically. Finally, after the passage of another seven days, the dove is dispatched again; this time it does not return. It is time to debark the ark.

Once returned to dry land, Noah becomes the recipient of the Bible's first divine covenant—an agreement, usually between two entities, one decidedly more powerful than the other—including God's promise that "never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waves of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." This first covenant is notable because, in contrast to the subsequent covenants in the Old Testament, this one is between God and all humankind, not just between God and the Israelites.

The saga of Noah ends with the odd tale of the patriarch becoming drunk on wine and passing out naked in his tent, where he is seen by his son Ham, who fails to avert his eyes or cover his father's nakedness. This act of impiety leads to Noah's curse on Ham's son, Canaan, who is condemned to a life of servitude to Ham's two brothers, who perform the proper act and cover their father's shameful display. The fact that the curse is placed on Canaan, instead of his father, who was the true transgressor, has suggested to scholars that the purpose of the tale is to justify the Israelites' later subjugation of the Canaanites. With the end of this episode, Noah's moment in the spotlight is over: "All the days of Noah were nine hundred fifty years; and he died."

Abraham

First Patriarch

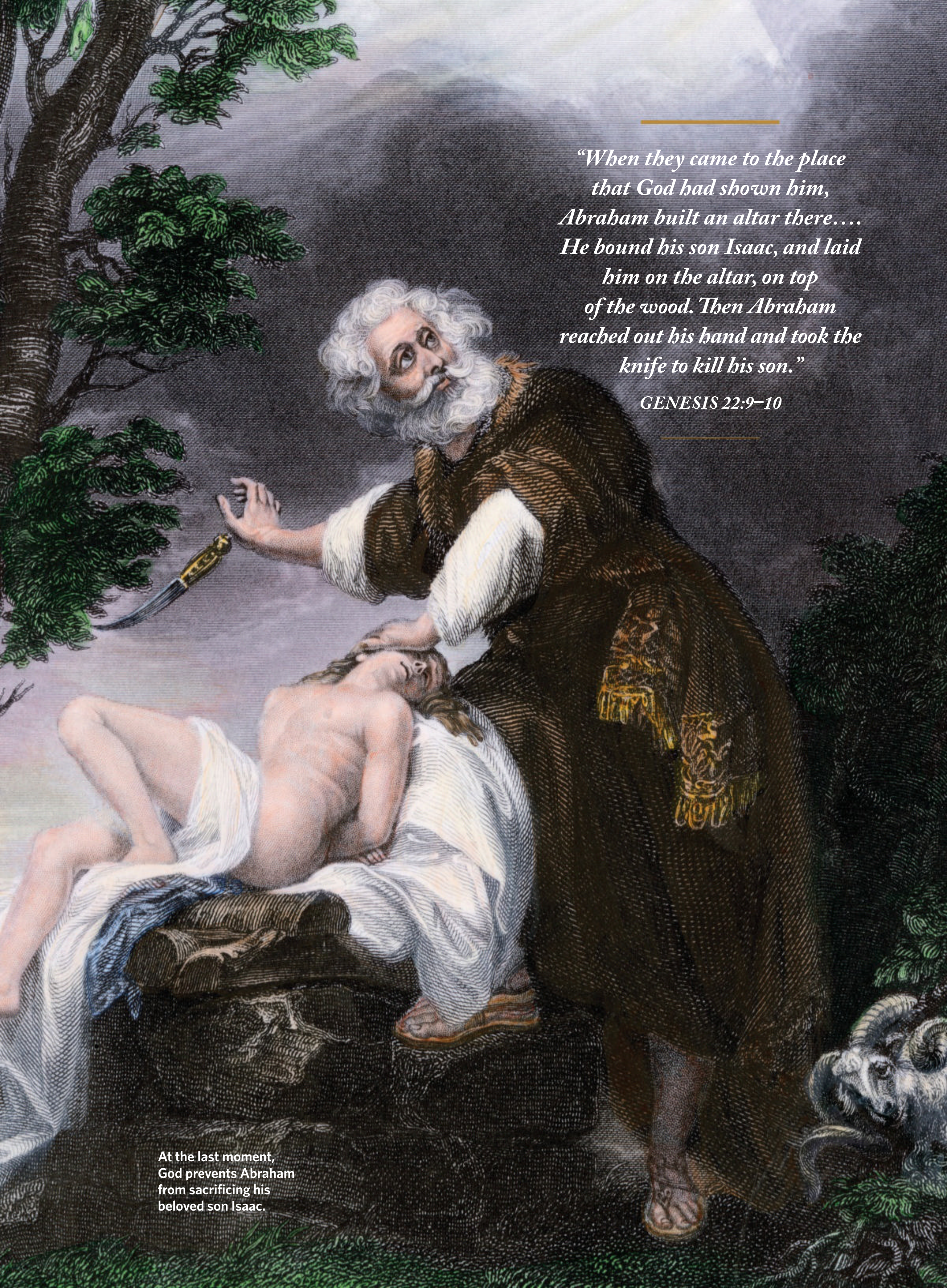
God begins his special relationship with the Israelites through this strong leader, whom he tests almost beyond endurance.

With the introduction of Abraham, the Bible begins the story of God's special relationship with the people of Israel. It is to Abraham that God declares: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Later God tells him: "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted." Thus begins the intimate connection between God and the people of Israel that will serve as the primary focus of the Old Testament.

Abraham is a towering figure: leader, visionary, warrior. It is he who settles in the land of Canaan, which would later become Israel. It is he who establishes the rite of circumcision as the mark of membership carried by the people devoted to and protected by God. It is he who leads his people in a time of famine to Egypt, where he hoodwinks the Egyptians into believing that his beautiful wife Sarah is his sister, so terrified is he that Pharaoh would have him killed to take possession of Sarah if Pharaoh knew she had a husband. Thankfully, although Abraham ungallantly accedes to Sarah being taken into Pharaoh's household, God fulfills his promise of protection and sends "great plagues" (unidentified) on the people of Egypt, causing Pharaoh to free Abraham and Sarah and send them back to Canaan. Later, Abraham defeats a coalition of eastern kings to rescue his nephew Lot and the kings of Canaan who had been in subjugation for 12 years.

Finally, it is Abraham and Sarah for whom God performs the miracle of childbirth, granting them a son in their old age, although the couple had long ago accepted that Sarah was unable to conceive. So sure were they of this, in fact, that Hagar, one of Sarah's Egyptian servants, was wed to Abraham in order to bear him an heir. (Using a servant as a surrogate was not uncommon in the ancient world.) Ishmael was the result of this union, a "wild ass of a man," who would also be the founder of a "great nation." But it would be Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah to whom the divine covenant would be extended and in whom the story of Israel would continue.

Given the miracle of Isaac's birth and his parents' joy at his arrival, one can only imagine the anguish Abraham must have felt when instructed by God to sacrifice his beloved son. Our modern sensibilities reel at the thought that a benevolent God would ask such a thing of a parent, but Abraham passes the ultimate test of faith, coming within inches of cutting his son's throat before God intercedes and stays Abraham's hand. Isaac never knew how close he was to death.

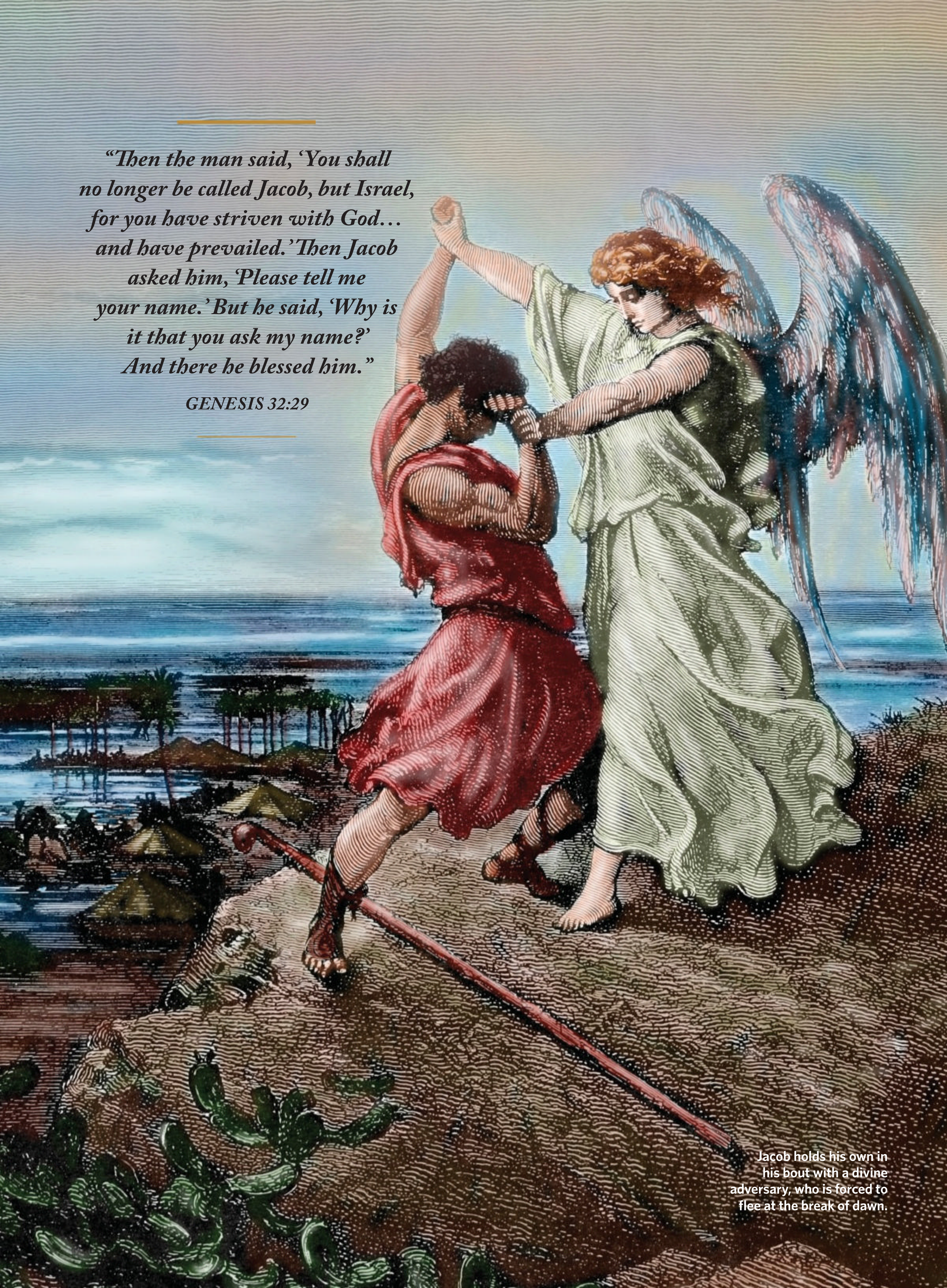


“When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there…. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.”

GENESIS 22:9–10

At the last moment, God prevents Abraham from sacrificing his beloved son Isaac.

> *“Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God… and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him.”*
>
> *GENESIS 32:29*



Jacob holds his own in his bout with a divine adversary, who is forced to flee at the break of dawn.

Jacob

Cunning Twin

He is injured in his fight with the angel beside the Jabbok River, but he emerges with a blessing for himself and his people.

The saga of Jacob is filled with colorful tales, none more so than two involving his twin brother, Esau. In the first, which draws a clear distinction between the thoughtful, clever Jacob and the more impulsive, duller Esau, Jacob persuades his famished brother to trade a bowl of the stew Jacob has cooked in exchange for Esau's birthright as the eldest son. It is the first indication that Jacob is the far better son to carry on God's sacred covenant initiated with Abraham, and passed on to his son, and Jacob's father, Isaac. But Jacob needs more than just Esau's birthright, he must also receive the blessing of Isaac, who is on his deathbed and nearly blind. (In the ancient world, such blessings were believed to establish the character and future of the one blessed; and they could not be retracted for any reason.) Jacob and his mother, the resourceful Rebekah, concoct a clever plot to hoodwink Isaac into giving the blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. (See page 41 for more details.) The ruse works to perfection, Jacob receives Isaac's blessing and the new patriarch of the covenant is established.

Two other images from the tales of Jacob have captured the popular imagination. The first is Jacob's dream in which he sees a great ladder (or stairway) "reaching to heaven, and the angels were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth.… I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'" And so the story links Jacob's unforgettable image of a stairway to heaven—apologies to Led Zeppelin—with a renewal of God's promise to bless and protect the future people of Israel. (Jacob's dream is the source of the timeless African American spiritual "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder.")

The other beloved Jacob story is the tale of his wrestling all night with a divine being of some kind—is it an angel, a holy man, or even God?—beside a stream of the Jabbok River. The Bible calls Jacob's opponent a man, but this is clearly no typical human. "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.'" (This daybreak device links the story to very ancient folklore in which divine beings must not be seen during the day.) But Jacob refuses to release the "man" until he is given a blessing. The divine being acquiesces, then vanishes, leaving Jacob to limp away, permanently disabled by his encounter with the divine. The story links suffering and blessing in an unforgettably profound way.

Finally, after some 20 years serving his Uncle Laban—he is tricked into marrying Laban's older daughter (Leah) for seven years before he can marry the daughter he truly loves (Rachel)—he returns to his homeland in Canaan, where the nation of Israel will later be born.

Joseph

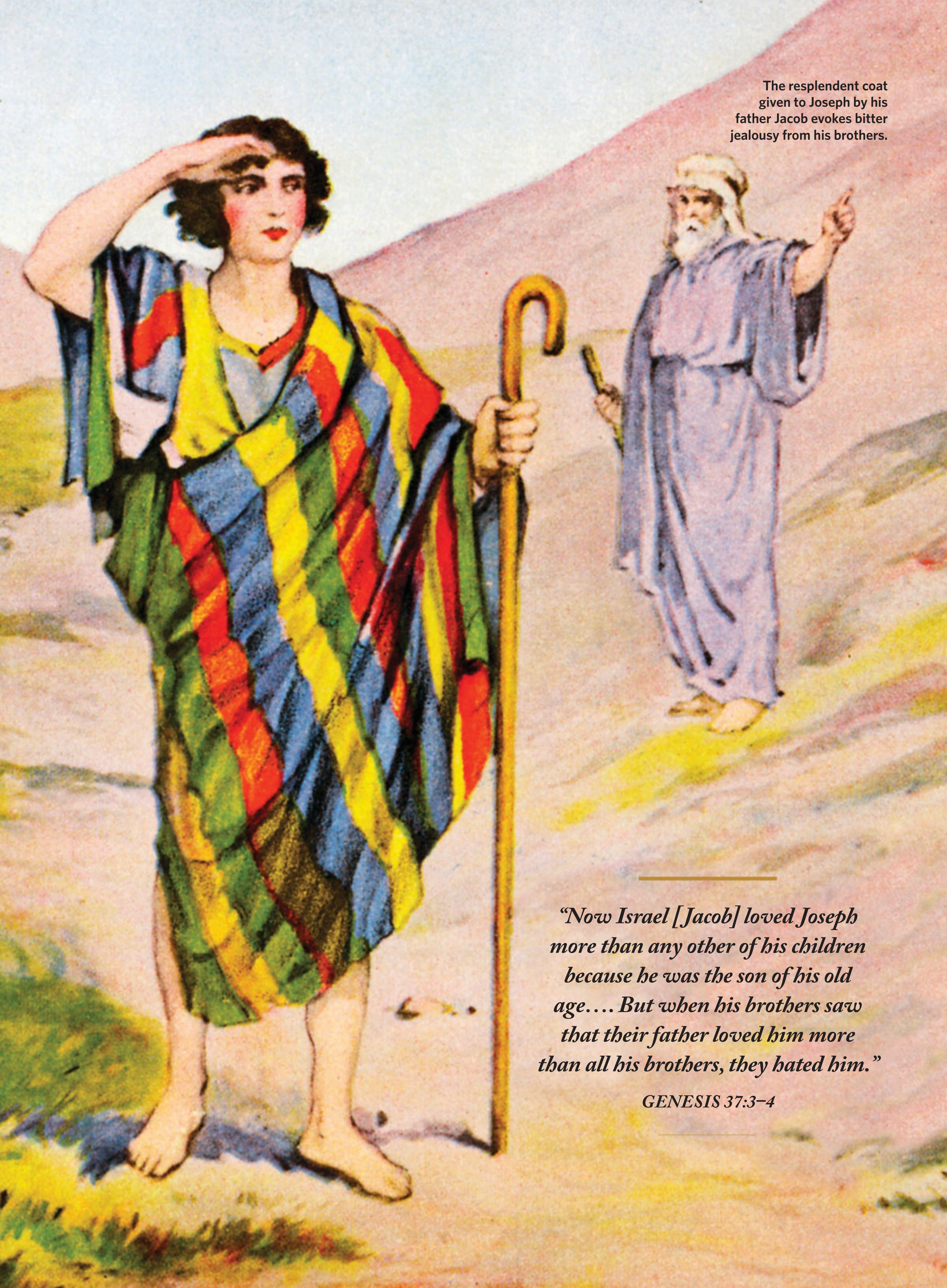
Sage Adviser

A twisty tale takes him from captivity (twice) to the pinnacle of Egyptian society, where he forgives his treacherous brothers and sets his family's affairs in order.

Filled with shocking twists and surprising turns, the story of Joseph is one of the most dramatic and entertaining tales in the Bible. He is the eldest son of Rachel, the wife whom Jacob labored seven long years to wed, and as such is his father's clear favorite from an early age. A sumptuous coat, given to Joseph by Jacob, is an unmistakable mark of Jacob's favor. Not surprisingly, this status makes him the target of intense envy and jealousy from his elder brothers, born to Leah, the wife Jacob married only to ultimately earn the hand of Rachel. Joseph does not help matters by reporting two vivid dreams to his brothers. In the first, the sheaves of the brothers are all bowing down to Joseph's sheaf, which rises and towers above the others; in the second, the very sun, moon and stars are paying tribute to Joseph as well.

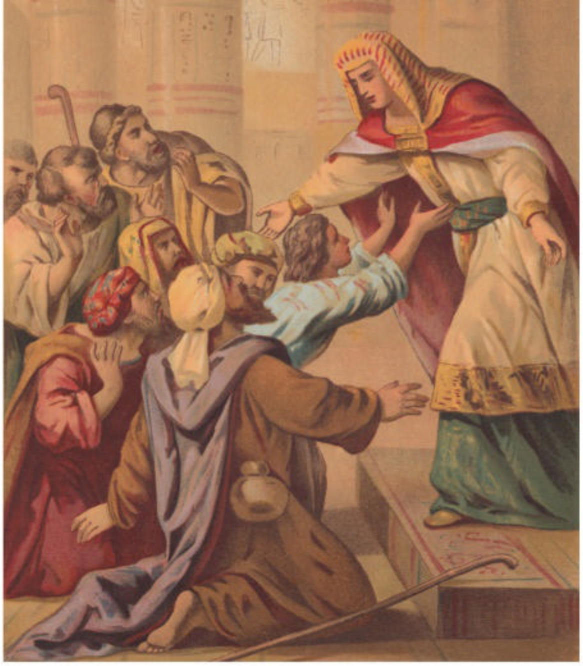
Was Joseph so young that he could not discern how arrogant these dreams might have seemed to his brothers? Or was he so prideful that he just didn't care? The Bible does not tell us, but the result is that his brothers begin conspiring to kill him. Out tending their flocks, several of the brothers think the time is right to dispose of their presumptuous brother. They throw him into a pit as they debate just what to do to him. (Such pits were typically used as cisterns to hold water, or occasionally as a makeshift prison cell.) When a traveling band of traders pass by, they decide not to kill him—eldest brother Reuben pleads with his brothers not to shed Joseph's blood—and instead to pull him from the pit and sell him into slavery. The brothers strip Joseph of his beautiful coat, cover it with sheep's blood, then head home and use the coat as evidence to persuade their father that Joseph has been killed. Jacob is beside himself with grief. Soon thereafter, Joseph's new masters sell him to Potiphar, a captain in the Egyptian guard, thus beginning the saga of Joseph's decades-long residency in Egypt.

Joseph quickly impresses Potiphar with his astute handling of Potiphar's household. Soon Joseph is managing all of Potiphar's affairs. But, alas, Joseph's success is short-lived. Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him, and when he rebuffs her, she pulls off his robe—clothing is yet again used as a tool for trickery—and runs to her husband with it, claiming that Joseph has attempted to rape her. Potiphar immediately throws Joseph into jail, where he languishes for years. It is only through his powers of dream interpretation that Joseph is able to escape, when a former prisoner reports Joseph's powers of divination to Pharaoh, who is troubled by disturbing dreams that none of his many advisers can interpret for him. As is so often the case in the biblical stories, the dreams come in pairs. In

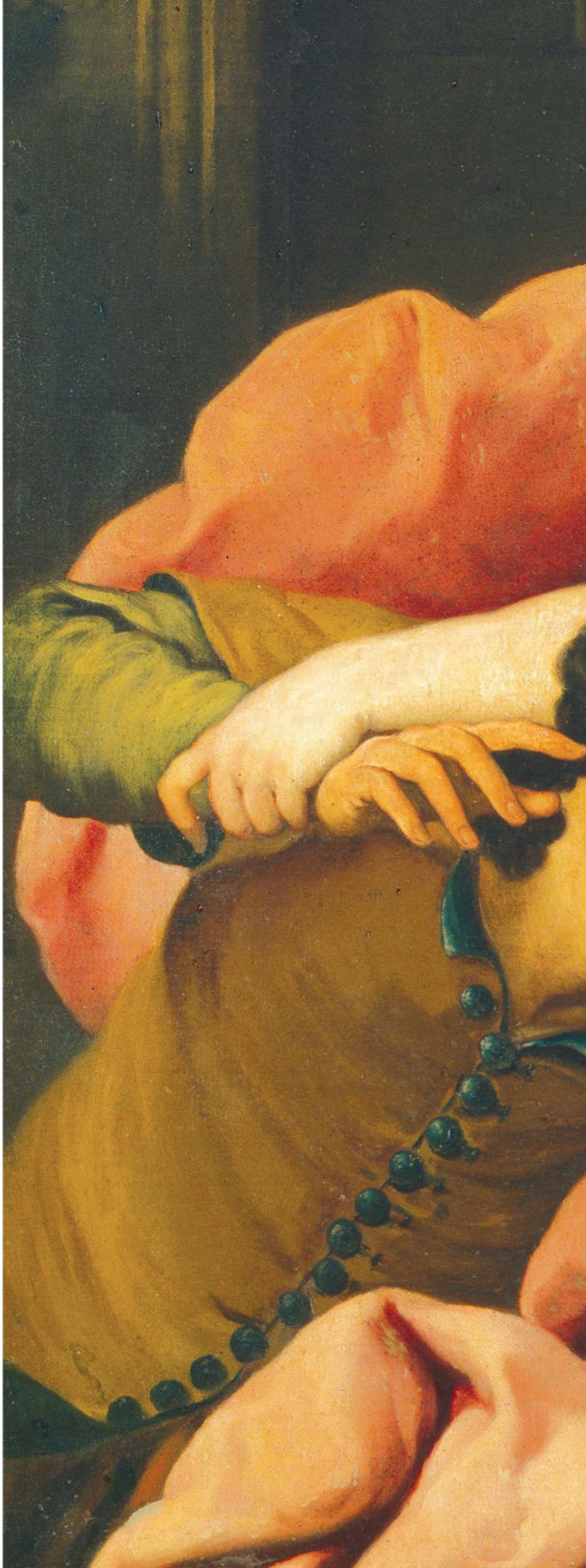


The resplendent coat given to Joseph by his father Jacob evokes bitter jealousy from his brothers.

> *“Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age…. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him.”*
>
> GENESIS 37:3–4

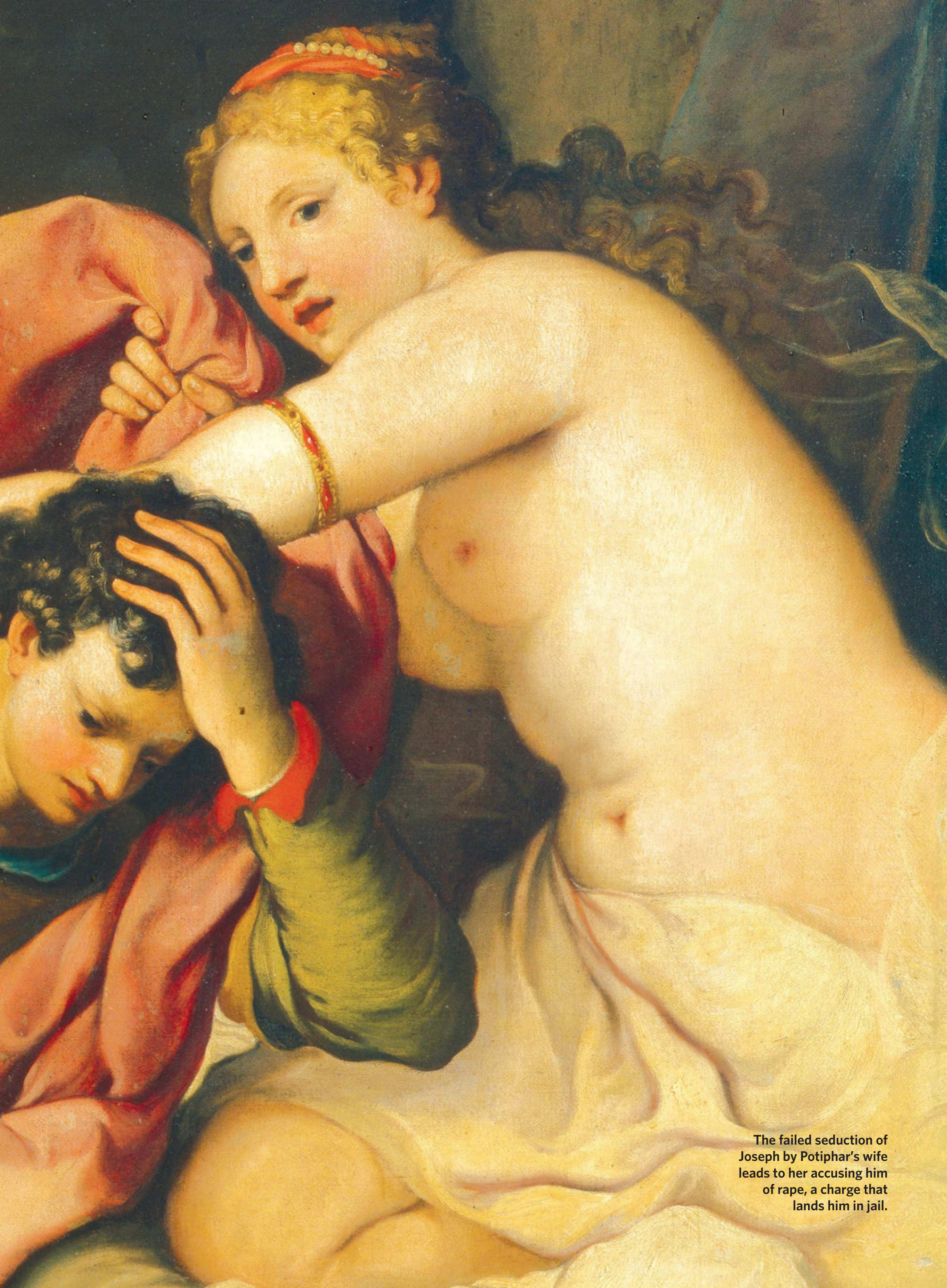


Joseph calms the fears of his brothers, who are terrified that he will punish them for abandoning him in his youth.



Pharaoh's first dream, seven "poor, very ugly, and thin" cows devour seven "fat and sleek" cows; in the second, seven "withered, thin" ears of grain swallow up seven "full and good" ears. Joseph, giving credit for all his powers to God, immediately interprets the visions as predicting seven years of plenty for the land of Egypt, to be followed by seven years of famine. Impressed by Joseph's wisdom and intelligence—and his clear connection to the divine—Pharaoh charges Joseph with making preparations for this decidedly mixed future. As with Potiphar, Joseph is soon managing Pharaoh's affairs completely, and when the famine hits the entire region just as Joseph predicted, his foresight in setting aside massive stores of food and grain enables Egypt to not only survive, but also to prosper from the sale of its stored goods to people from all the starving territories nearby. There will be no more setbacks for Joseph, who will continue to be a leader in Egypt until his death.

The final section of Joseph's story concerns the ultimate reconciliation with his brothers, who come begging for food themselves as famine overtakes Canaan as well. They do not recognize their long-lost brother, but Joseph recognizes them and puts them through a series of tests before finally revealing himself and offering his forgiveness. The brothers remain fearful, only truly accepting Joseph's kindness after it survives the much-celebrated death of their father, Jacob. "Do not be afraid," Joseph tells them. "Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."



The failed seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife leads to her accusing him of rape, a charge that lands him in jail.

Moses

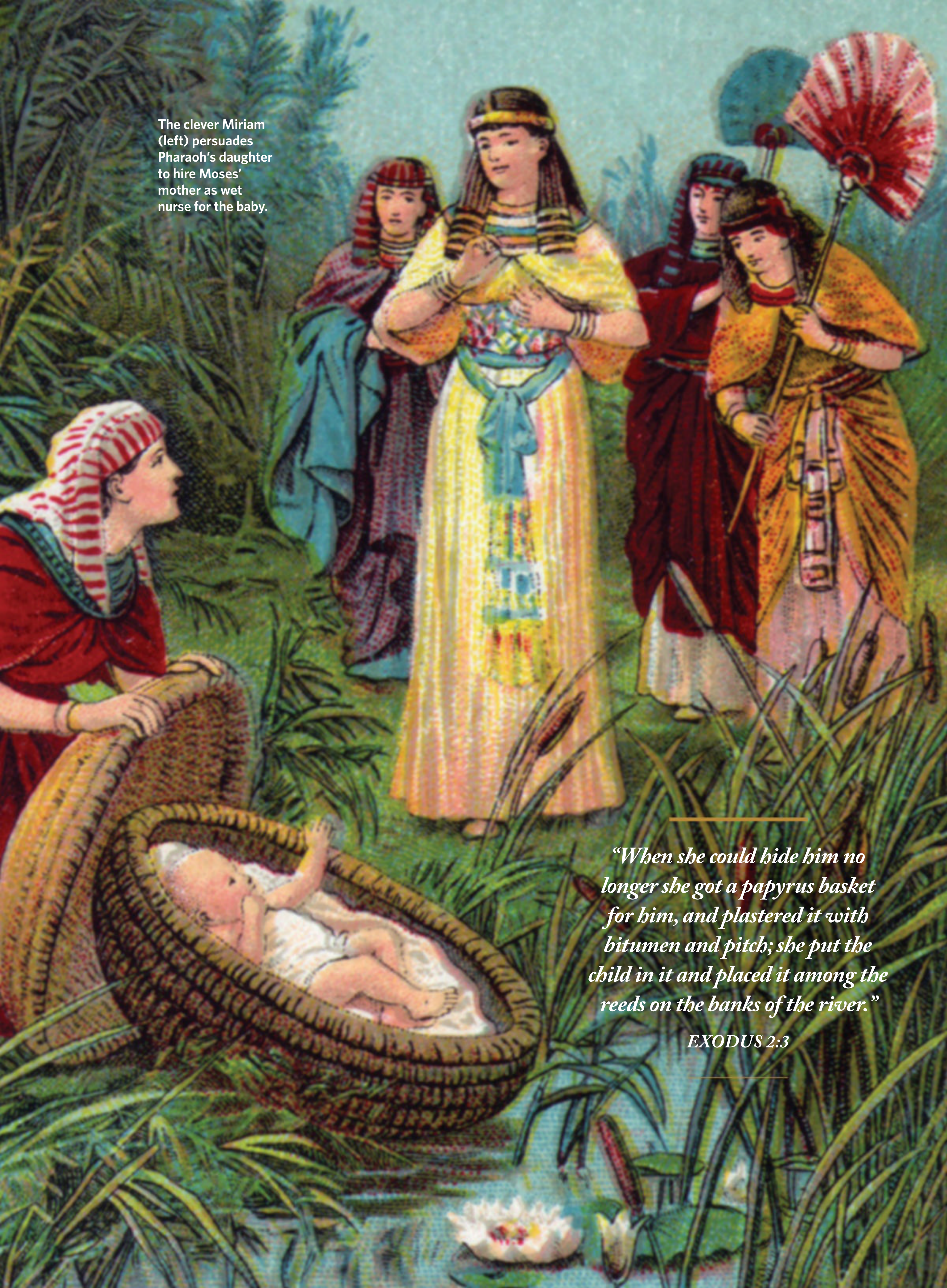
Leader and Lawgiver

While leading his people out of captivity in Egypt to the very edge of the Promised Land, he establishes an enduring legal framework for the future nation of Israel.

There is no more towering figure in the Old Testament than Moses. The pivotal Book of Exodus, which sees the Israelites through captivity in Egypt to the brink of nationhood, is really the story of Moses and his relationship with God and his frequently faithless followers. When Moses is born, the Egyptians are worried that the Hebrews in their midst are growing too numerous and too prosperous. Pharaoh decrees that all male children of the Israelites are to be killed, leading Moses' mother to fashion a papyrus basket, plaster it "with bitumen and pitch," place the newborn Moses in it and leave him amidst the reeds on the bank of the river. The basket is found by Pharaoh's daughter, who adopts the baby as her own. (Moses' sister, Miriam, who has been watching from a distance, persuades the daughter to accept Moses' mother as wet nurse.)

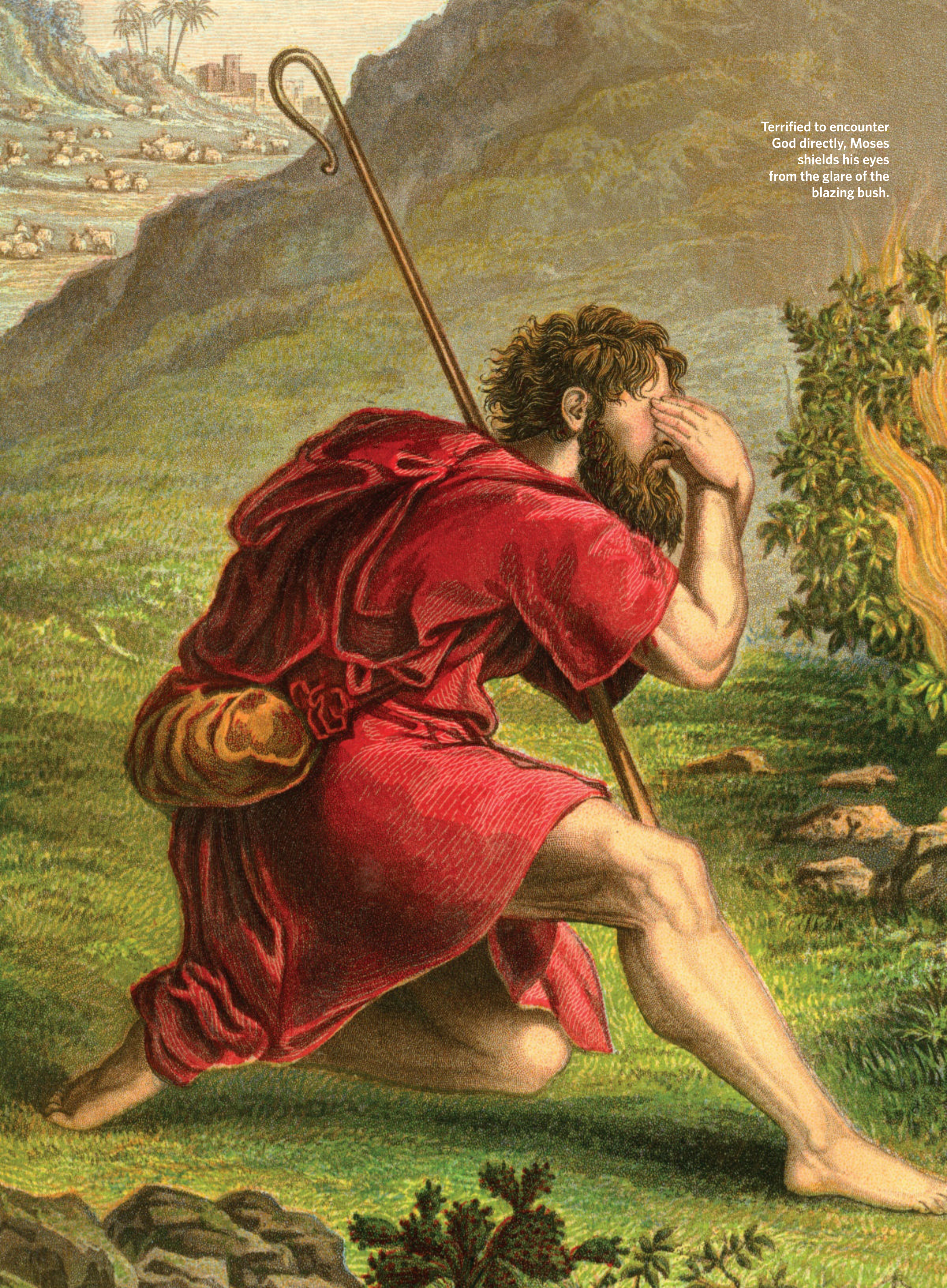
As he grows up, Moses becomes aware of the injustices being inflicted on his people. (The Bible doesn't tell us how Moses knows that he is Hebrew and not Egyptian, but he does.) As a young man, he intervenes when he witnesses an Egyptian abusing an Israelite; he kills the abuser and buries his body in the sand. When he learns that this act of violence is known, he flees from Pharaoh's wrath to the land of the Midianites, where he meets and marries his wife Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest.

Soon thereafter, he begins his long relationship with the God of Abraham and Isaac, who will renew his covenant with the Israelites through Moses. He is tending his father-in-law's flock when he encounters a flaming bush on Mount Horeb. (Sinai will be described as God's holy mountain through much of Exodus but Horeb is occasionally also designated as the site of divine communication.) "The bush was blazing," the Bible tells us, "yet it was not consumed." When Moses turns aside to examine this miraculous event, God calls to him from the bush: "Moses!

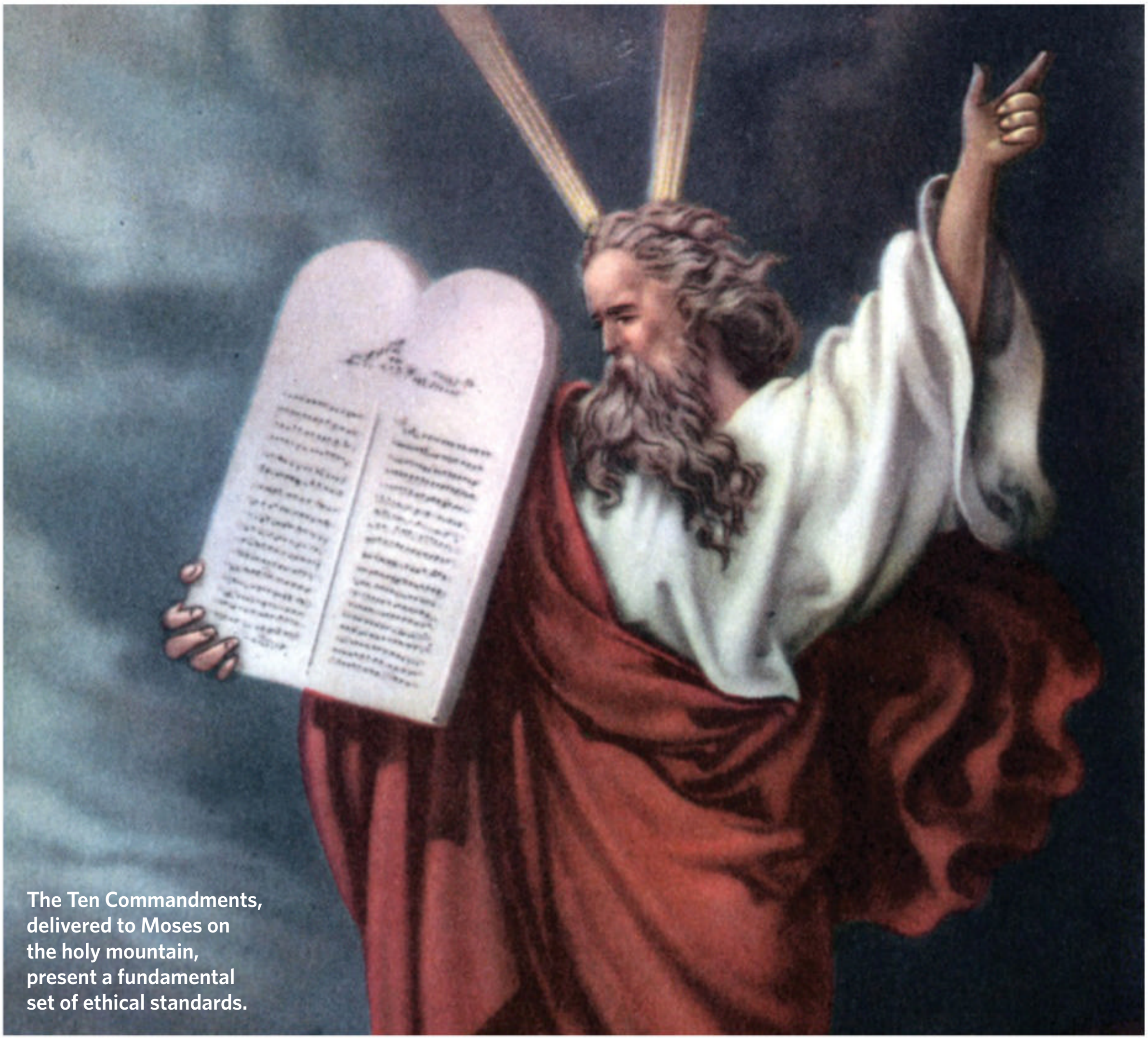


The clever Miriam (left) persuades Pharaoh's daughter to hire Moses' mother as wet nurse for the baby.

> *"When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the banks of the river."*
>
> EXODUS 2:3



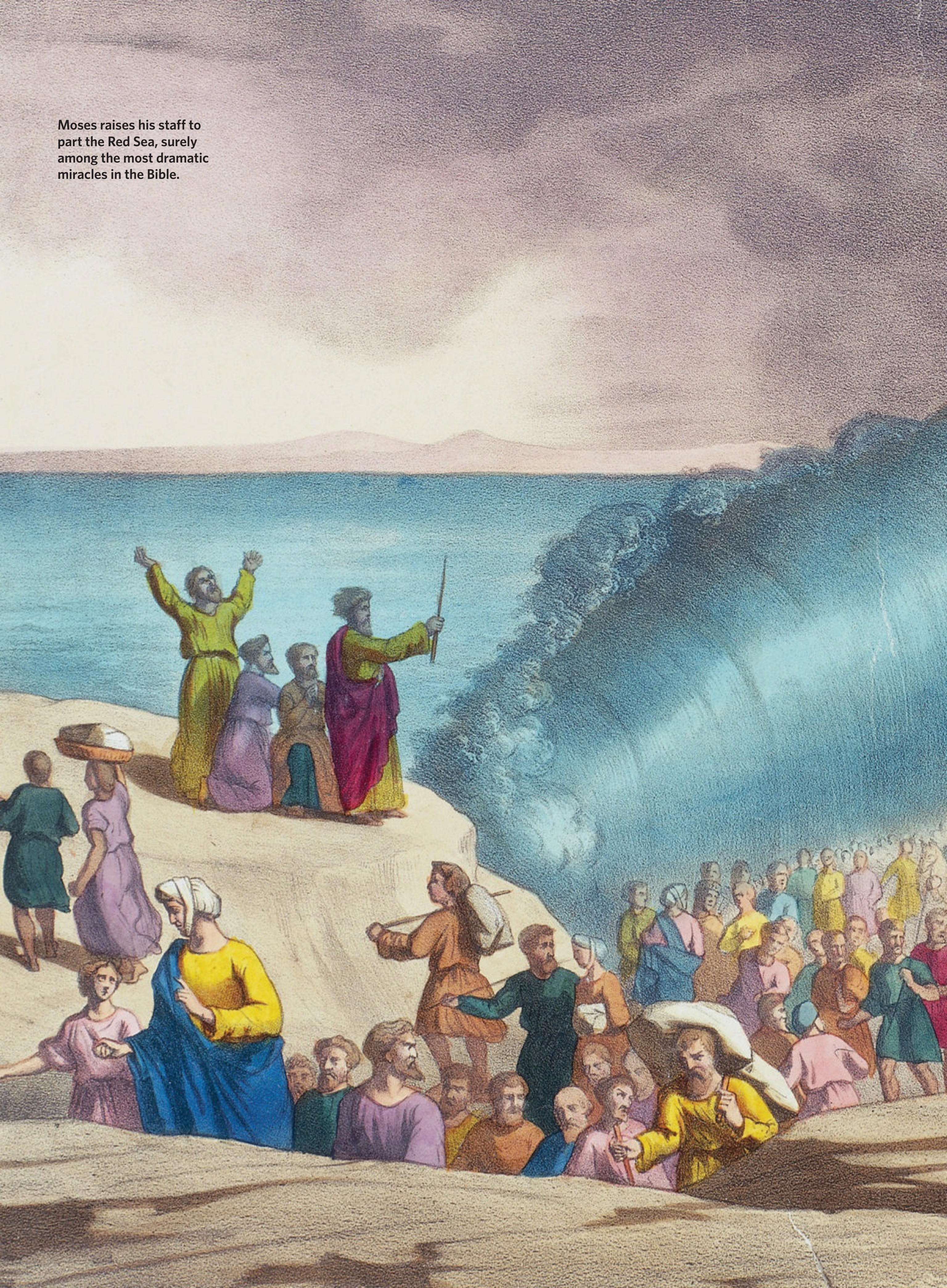
Terrified to encounter God directly, Moses shields his eyes from the glare of the blazing bush.



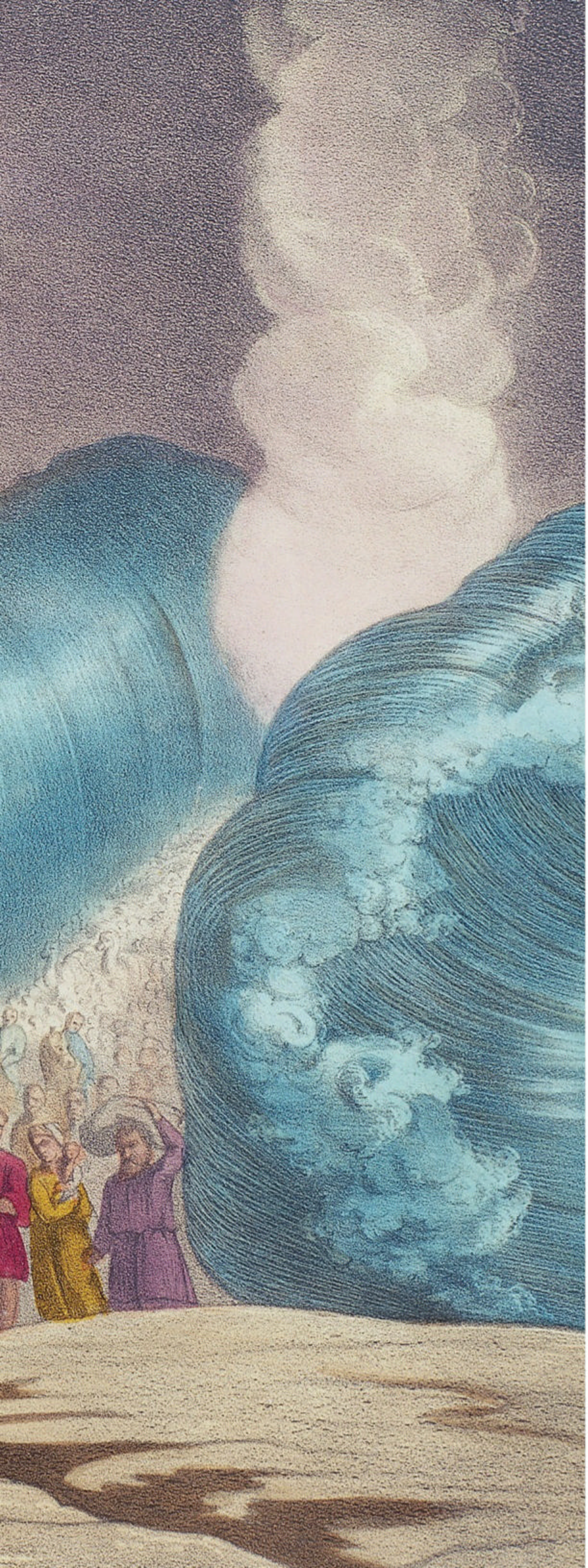
The Ten Commandments, delivered to Moses on the holy mountain, present a fundamental set of ethical standards.

Moses!” Moses responds: “Here I am.” (This specific call-and-response language is found throughout the Old Testament when prophets and leaders are called by God.) “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.… I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.… I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry…and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Thus begins the tale of Moses’ work on God’s behalf to free the Israelites from the yoke of the Egyptians, culminating in a series of calamities visited on the Egyptians by God. (These are popularly known as the 10 plagues, but the first nine for the most part are simply called “signs and wonders” in the Bible; only the climactic 10th act of God—the killing of Egyptian children—receives the designation of “plague.”) In each case, Moses goes to Pharaoh asking that he release the Israelites and allow them to leave. Over and over, Pharaoh seems inclined to agree, but then changes his mind; in some instances, the Bible tells us, Pharaoh “hardened his heart,” and in others Pharaoh’s heart is hardened by God, who deems it necessary to teach Egyptians and Israelites alike a lesson about God’s dominion over His creation. Here, in order, are the horrors visited upon the Egyptians: (1) All the waters throughout Egypt are turned into blood when Moses’ brother and sometime spokesman Aaron takes his staff and stretches his “hand over the waters of Egypt”; Aaron stretches forth his hand again and an infestation of frogs (2) appears everywhere, inside homes, in beds, cupboards, ovens, everywhere; next are swarms of gnats (3), then masses of flies (4), then a “pestilence” (5) that kills all the Egyptian livestock, then a “fine dust” (6) that causes “festering boils on humans and animals,” then destructively heavy “hail (7) with fire flashing continually in the midst of it”—Moses, not Aaron, raises his staff toward heaven to produce this wonder—then a “dense swarm of locusts (8) as



Moses raises his staff to part the Red Sea, surely among the most dramatic miracles in the Bible.

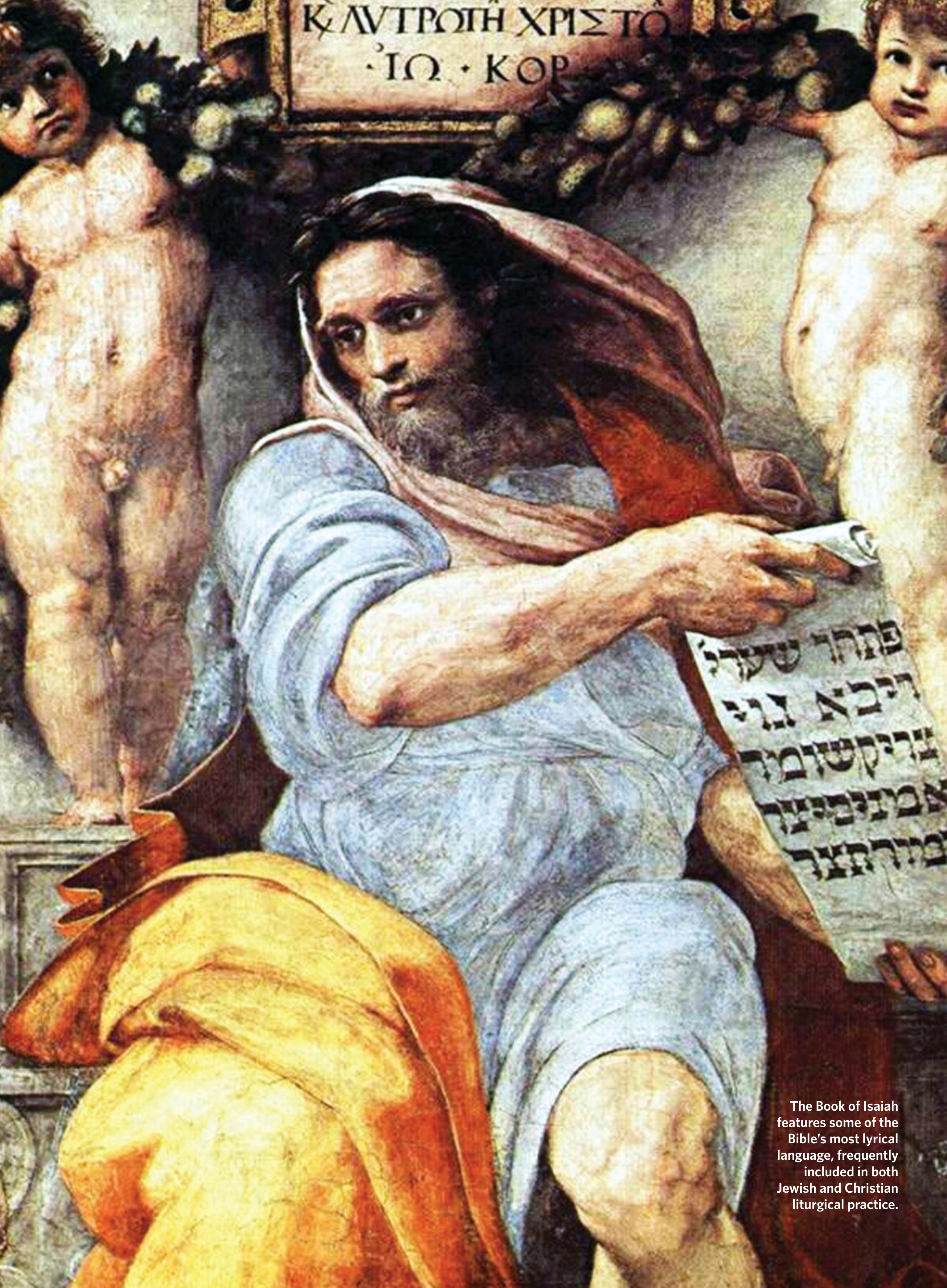


had never been seen before" that consumed every tree and plant throughout the land, and finally three days of darkness so dense that the entire population of Egypt is unable to move at all. When these nine "signs and wonders" fail to produce liberation for the Israelites, God unleashes his most extreme punishment by killing "every firstborn in the land of Egypt," sparing only the Israelites who daubed sacramental lamb's blood on the "doorposts and the lintel" of their homes, such blood being a signal for God to "pass over" their homes and spare the inhabitants. (The telling of the tale includes extensive directions for the festival of Passover that commemorates the event.)

At last, the Israelites are allowed to leave, but not before another change of heart, when "all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army" pursued the Israelites to the edge of the Red Sea. There Moses, at God's direction, produces one last astounding miracle, parting the sea for the Israelites to cross, then directing the waters to return again and drown the entire company of Egyptians as they attempted to pursue.

One would think that these many miracles would render the Israelites unfailingly faithful to God, but the rest of Exodus is filled with tales of their frequently childish misbehavior as Moses, at God's direction, begins the task of codifying the laws that would govern their shared society and provide the directions for the construction of the tabernacle where the Israelites would worship God. What have come to be known as the Ten Commandments are the most legendary set of proscriptions. Inscribed on two tablets of stone by the "finger of God," they are shattered when Moses hurls them to the ground in anger after he descends from the holy mountain and finds the Israelites worshipping a "golden calf" they have chosen as their new god.

Over and over again, the Israelites complain about the conditions they face during 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. When God supplies them with food (a sweet flaky substance called manna) that drops from the heavens every night, they complain when it goes bad after the end of a day. When water proves scarce, they bellyache until Moses causes water to flow from a rock after a single blow from his mighty staff. Still they complain that Moses has brought them out of Egypt only to see them perish in the wilderness. At last, after decades of struggle, Moses will set eyes on the Promised Land, bringing an end to his many conflicts with this fractious brood.


Κ ΛΥΤΡΩΤΗ ΧΡΙΣΤΟ
ΙΩ · ΚΟΡ
פתחו שערי
ויבא גוי
צדיק שומר
אמונים יצר
סמוך תצר

The Book of Isaiah features some of the Bible's most lyrical language, frequently included in both Jewish and Christian liturgical practice.

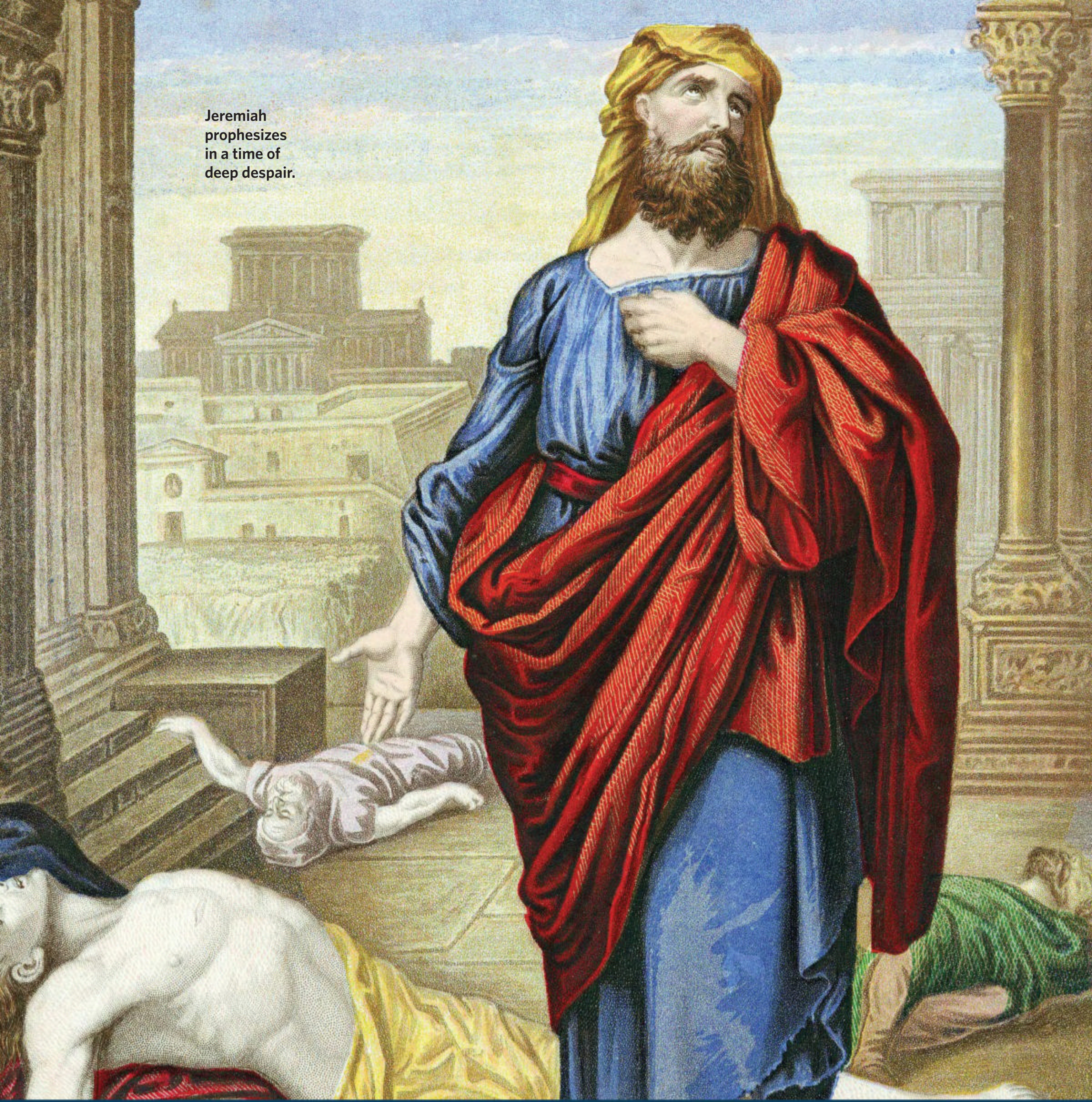
Voices in the Wilderness

These uncompromising figures risked their lives to speak truth to power.

While prophecy was a common means of divining the will of God (or gods) in the ancient world, much of it was performed by professional court personnel, who offered their predictions based on the stars, or the flight of birds, or the entrails of ritually sacrificed animals. One wonders how often such "official" prophets expressed criticism of their royal sponsors. The great prophets of the Old Testament, on the other hand, are called directly by God, and not by any human government or royal decree. Like Moses, they are often reluctant, fearful that they are not worthy to perform this vital function. But all of them answer the call and bravely declare the judgment of God as it has been given to them, even when their words speak harshly of those in power. The phrase, "speak truth to power," so common in current usage, was their unspoken motto thousands of years before it became a mantra of progressive contemporary politics.

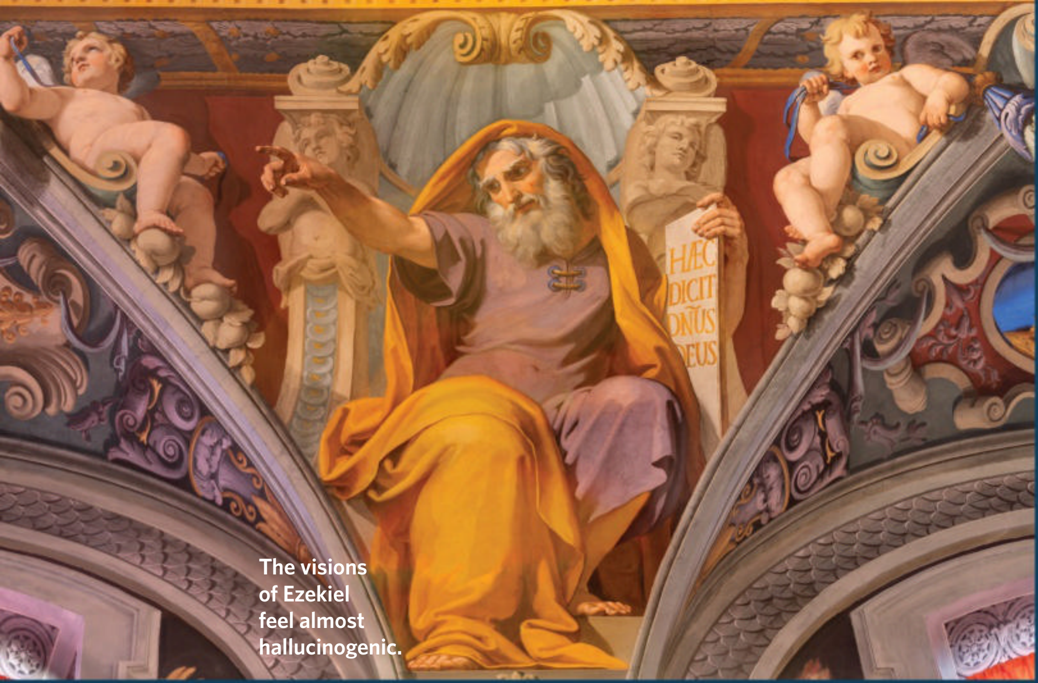
The scholars tell us that the historical circumstances in which the major Old Testament prophets were speaking fall into three categories: the period of Assyrian dominance, when the land of Israel was independent but under the sway of foreign powers; the period of exile, when the Israelites were held in captivity by the Babylonians; and the period after the Israelites were freed by Persian King Cyrus and allowed to return to their beloved homeland. The great Book of Isaiah, the longest of the prophetic books, includes passages apparently written in all three of these eras.

We know next to nothing about the person of **Isaiah**, but the often-lyrical poetry of the book that bears his name remains among the most quoted sections of the Bible, frequently used in worship by Jewish temples and Christian churches alike. Isaiah traces the dramatic arc of the people of Israel and Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel after it was divided), from subjugation in payment for its many sins and widespread corruption, to the ultimate oppression of exile, to the joy of return and reunion with the merciful God of the covenant, who never forsook his chosen people. Christians have long seen several passages in Isaiah as referring to the coming of Jesus. "For a child has been born for us," declares Isaiah, "a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Later, in one of four passages referring to a suffering servant, Isaiah speaks of a figure who "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities." While scholars have pointed to the many ways these passages have alternate interpretations for the Jewish community, Christians have always viewed them as referring to the coming of Jesus as the Christ, whose sacrifice on the cross would atone for humanity's many sins.



Jeremiah prophesizes in a time of deep despair.

The vision of **Jeremiah** is much darker. The Babylonians have invaded, Jerusalem has been destroyed, thousands have been killed or deported. The text is filled with suffering and lamentation—and judgment on the people of Judah for their many iniquities. “O that I had in the desert a traveler’s lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a band of traitors. They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth, for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the Lord.” Later, we learn the sufferings of Jeremiah himself, who prophesizes nothing but doom for successive kings of Judah and is imprisoned for his words of condemnation. This is a tale of the Israelites at their lowest moments, to be followed by the Book of Lamentations, bemoaning the destruction of Jerusalem and the suffering of the Israelites in Babylon. All this is presented as the will of God, brought about due to the apostasy of His chosen people.



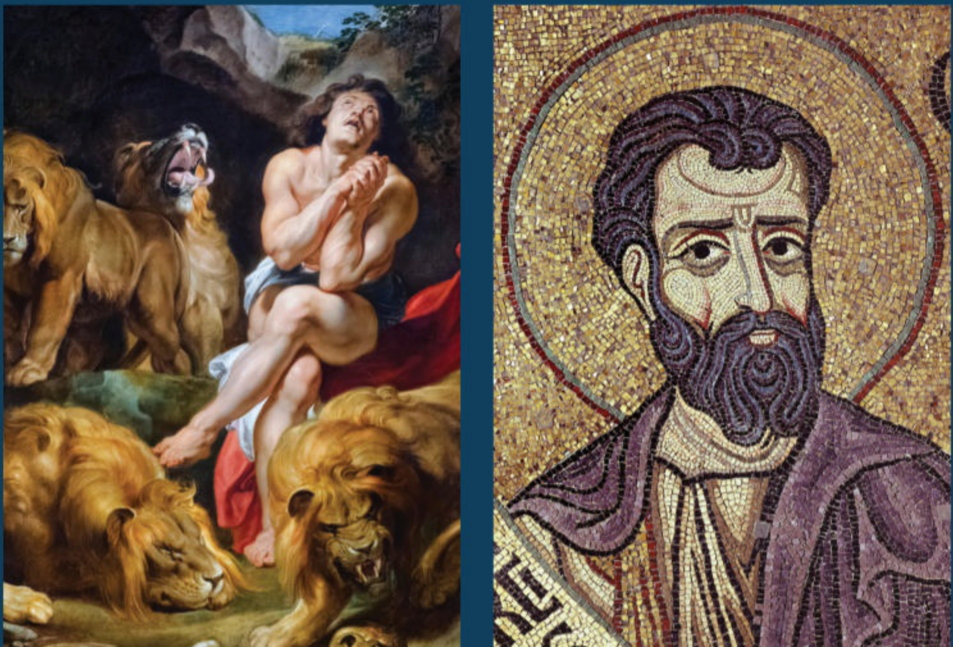
The visions of Ezekiel feel almost hallucinogenic.

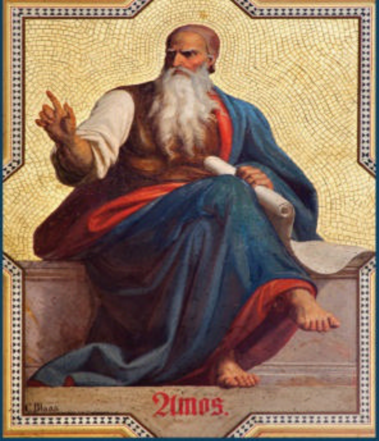
The themes in **Ezekiel** are similar, but they are expressed through highly original language, much of it evoking the feeling of a fever dream, filled with wild, mystical and sometimes seemingly incomprehensible, visions. The very first chapter includes Ezekiel's vision of four creatures with multiple faces (human, lion, ox, eagle), wings and hands, within a "great cloud" in which fire was "flashing continually." Attached to each creature is a wheel with rims "full of eyes all around," capable of effortlessly moving in any direction, including upward into the skies. Dare we say, freaky? Scholars have interpretations for all these elements, the bottom line being that Ezekiel is presenting an image of a completely unfettered divinity, no longer tied to the Jerusalem that is about to be destroyed, or to any particular temple or structure. This is followed by Ezekiel's commission from God. "He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn.... You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house." Ezekiel's listeners—some in exile, some still in Judah—refuse to believe his predictions about the destruction of Jerusalem, which nevertheless comes to pass just as Ezekiel had foretold. Happily for the Israelites, this destruction is followed by equally wondrous visions of the restoration of Judah and the return of the Israelites to their former glory. Condemnation and destruction are followed by redemption and renewal as God puts a "new heart" into the rebellious people and reestablishes His covenant with the once wayward Israelites.

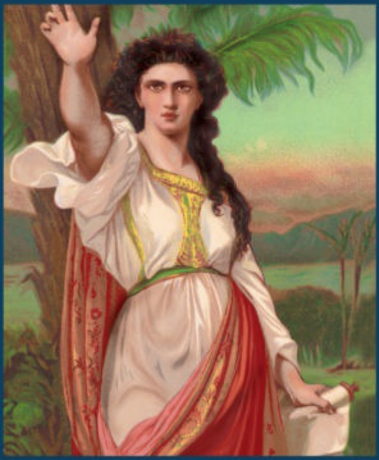
Also considered a major prophet, **Daniel**, who rises to a position of considerable power in Babylon despite his Jewish background, stands as a man of great faith, after he survives a night in a pit full of lions and emerges unscathed in the morning. King Darius is so impressed with Daniel's miraculous escape that he orders Daniel's jealous accusers to be thrown into the pit in Daniel's place.

While there is no biblical book devoted to him, **Elijah** is one of the great prophets and miracle workers in the Old Testament, at various points bringing fire down from the sky, producing never-ending supplies of food and even engineering a resurrection. Many of Elijah's miracles are intended to prove the superiority of the ancient God of Israel over Baal, a god of the Canaanites, who is worshipped by the current leadership of Israel, including the evil Jezebel.

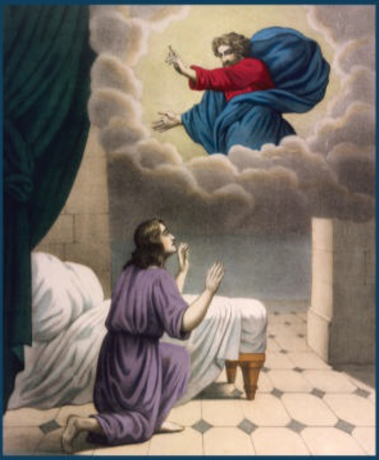
From left: Daniel's faith enables him to survive a night in a pit of lions; Hosea sees the subjugation of Israel as God's judgment.

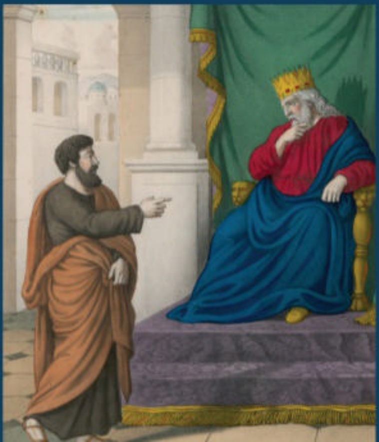






From top: Amos rails against the corruption of Israeli society; Deborah is a warrior and judge as well as a prophet; Samuel answers the call of God to become a great prophet; Nathan rebukes David for his relationship with Bathsheba.





Elijah's words—he condemns Jezebel and her husband Ahab constantly—put him in considerable danger, forcing him to flee and occasionally succumb to despair. But in the end, God supports Elijah and he triumphs over the wicked forces of Baal. Scripture calls for his eventual return to earth, a prediction that finds its way into several Jewish celebrations, including Passover, when it is traditional to leave a seat at the Seder table for his arrival.

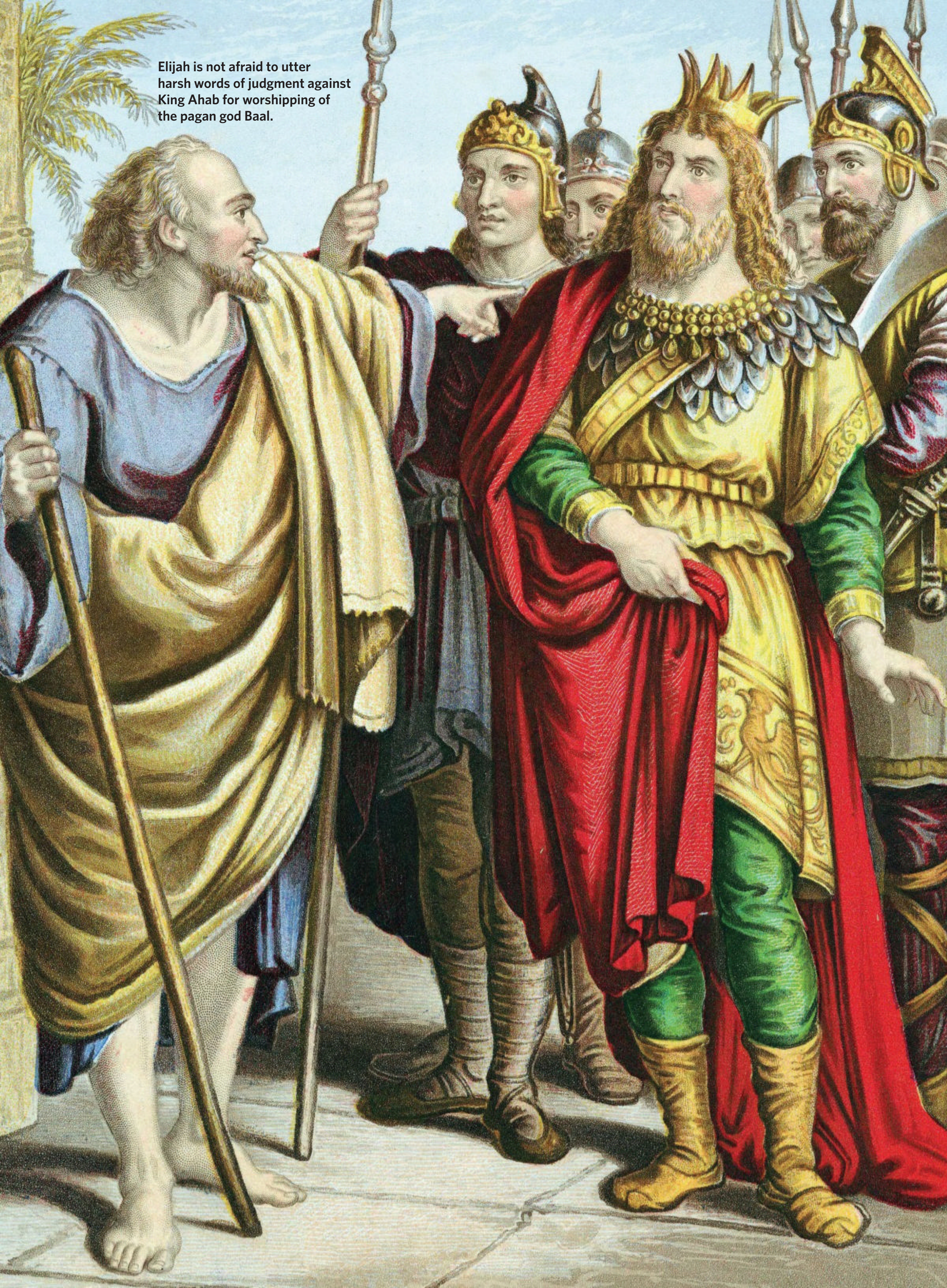
In addition to the major prophets are a host of "minor" prophets, including **Hosea**, who casts harsh judgment on the social, political and especially religious practices of the Israelites as the Assyrians come to dominate both Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BCE. He likens Israel to a promiscuous wife, whose unfaithfulness invites punishment, presenting a sad tale of national decline, with the Israelites ultimately condemned to return to the wilderness out of which Moses had led them so many years before.

The message of **Amos** is equally strict, but he is speaking to a comfortable and prosperous Israel before the onslaught of the Assyrians experienced by Hosea; his message is much more about the gross inequities of the society he sees all around him. A small farmer and herder himself, Amos rails against the cruelty and rapaciousness of the urban elites and large landholders. "Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy at the gate.... I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

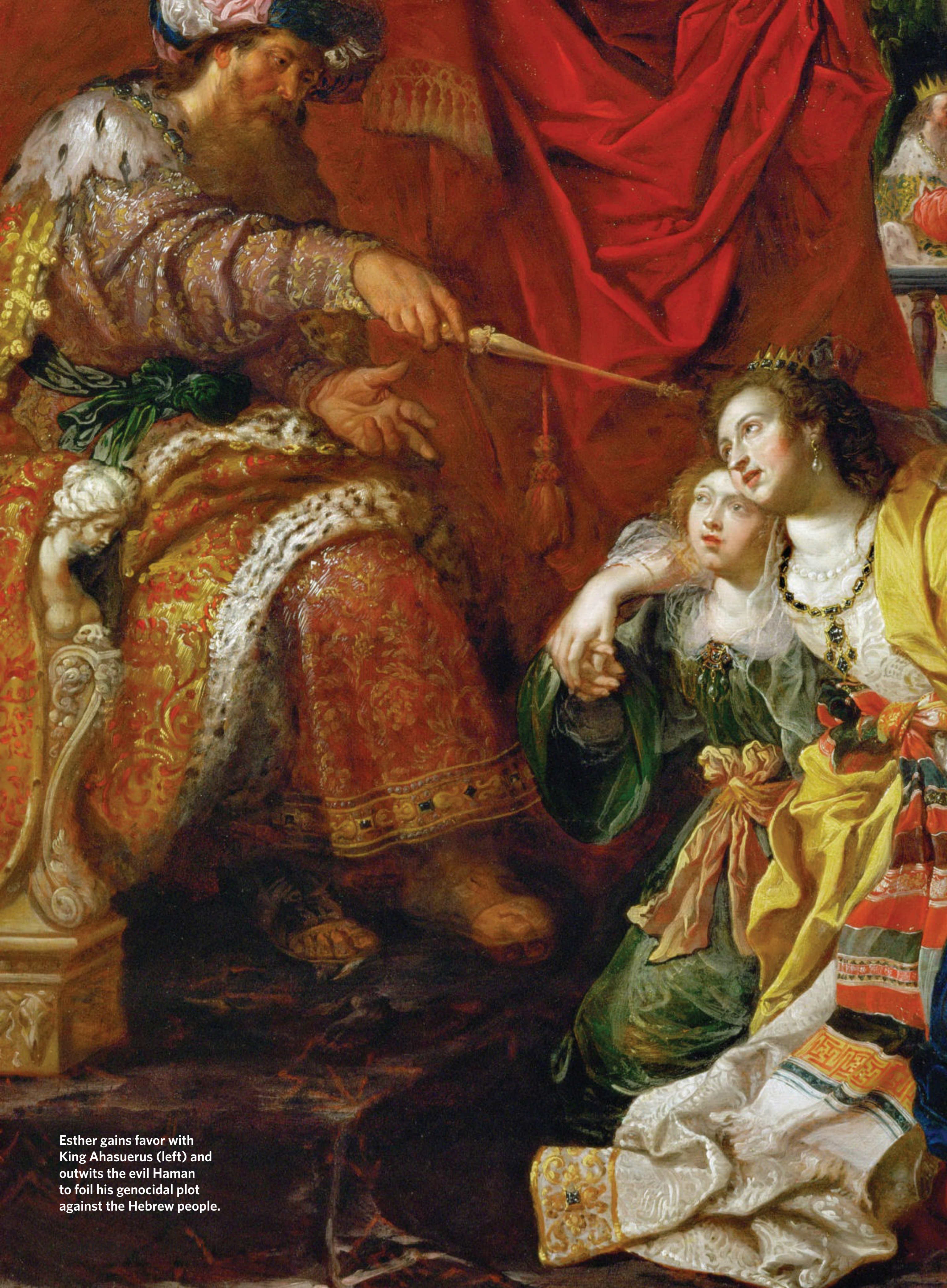
The Bible also includes a host of other figures sometimes designated as prophets. **Deborah**, the only female judge in the Book of Judges, is a charismatic military leader, who both prophesizes and directs a major defeat of the Canaanites while also settling disputes amongst the argumentative Israelites.

Samuel is one of the Bible's great transitional figures, promised to the service of God by his mother, Hannah, before he was even born. He goes on to be the last of the Israelite judges and then the priest/prophet who anoints Saul as the first Israelite king. He later condemns Saul for his many failings before designating David as the rightful king of Israel, thereby establishing the Davidic line as the rightful rulers of Israel from then on.

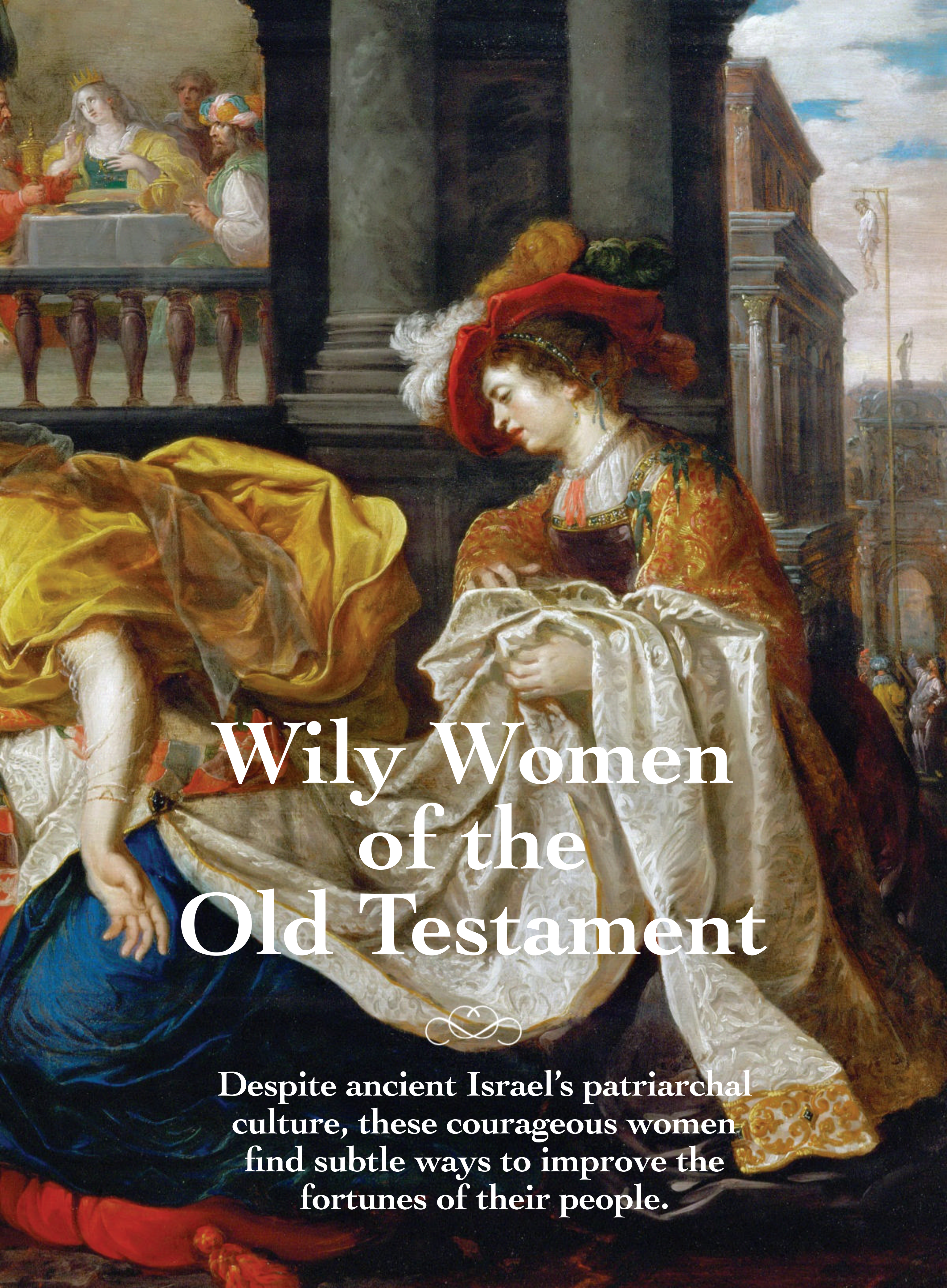
Nathan, a prophet in the court of King David, is not afraid to condemn David for his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and for his sending Bathsheba's husband into battle to be killed. He prophesizes that the child born of this illicit relationship will die, leaving Solomon, David's second son with Bathsheba, to become the new king of Israel.



Elijah is not afraid to utter harsh words of judgment against King Ahab for worshipping of the pagan god Baal.



Esther gains favor with King Ahasuerus (left) and outwits the evil Haman to foil his genocidal plot against the Hebrew people.



Wily Women of the Old Testament

Despite ancient Israel's patriarchal culture, these courageous women find subtle ways to improve the fortunes of their people.

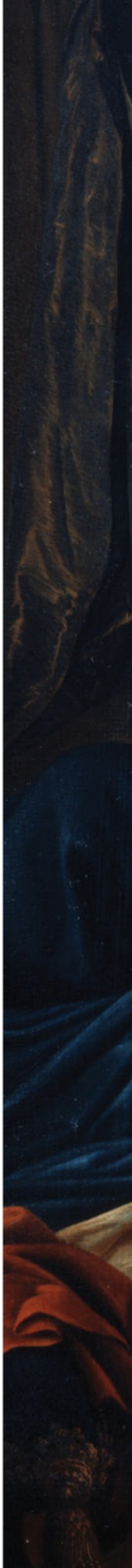
Sarah

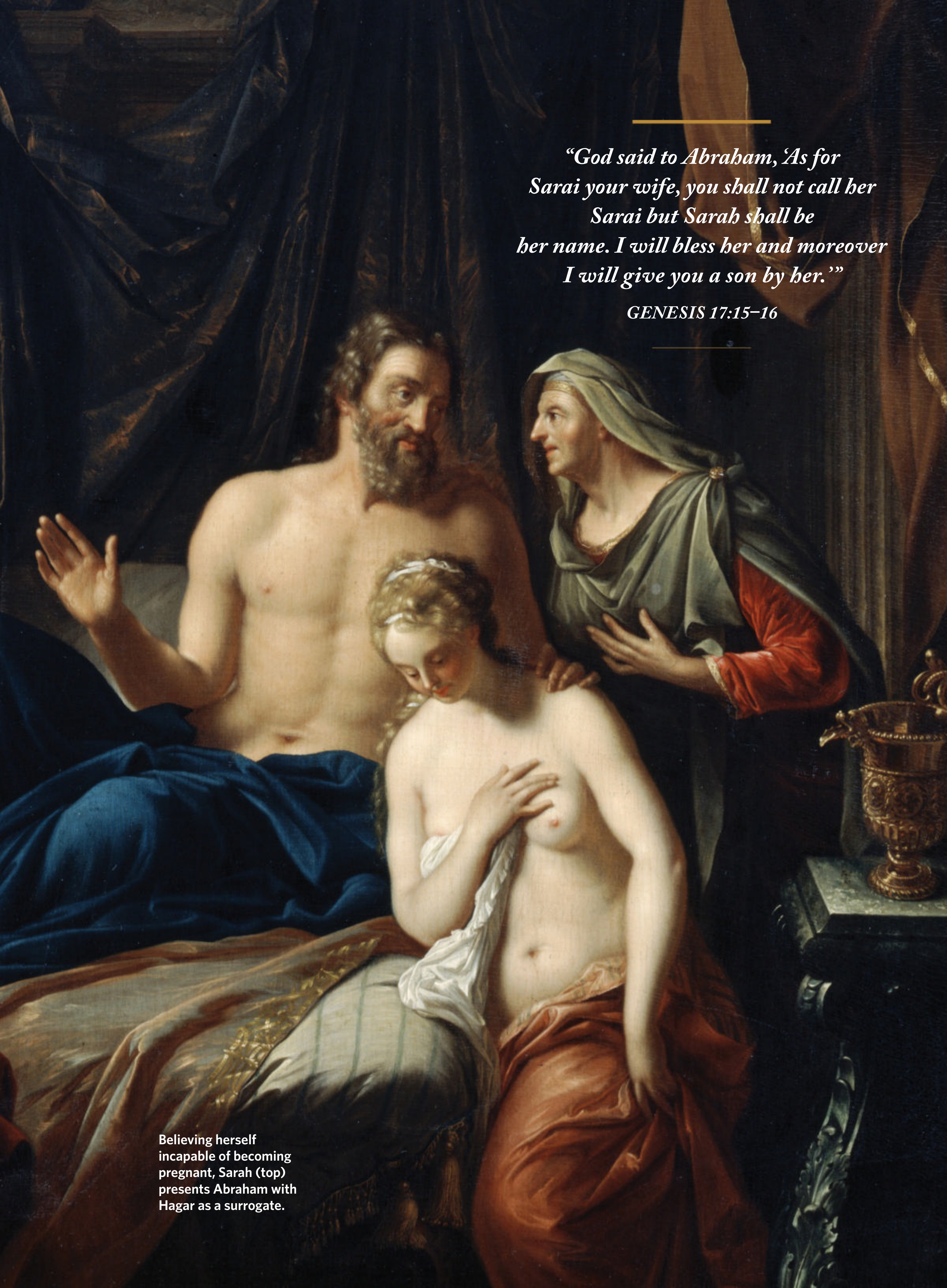
A Mother at Last

Wracked by jealousy and disappointment, she laughs in delight at a late-in-life gift from God.

There was a clear lesson to be derived from Sarah's ill-fated sojourn in Egypt: Her husband Abraham should have trusted in the Lord's promises of protection, rather than selfishly using trickery to save his own skin by presenting Sarah as his sister and allowing her to become a part of Pharaoh's household. The Bible does not tell us how Sarah felt about this arrangement, but both halves of the couple showed a lack of faith in God's promises in going along with it. (As the patriarch in a patriarchal culture, Abraham clearly deserves the lion's share of the blame.) The consistent message is that God will find a way to fulfill his covenant with the future people of Israel, no matter how flawed his human partners in the exercise may be.

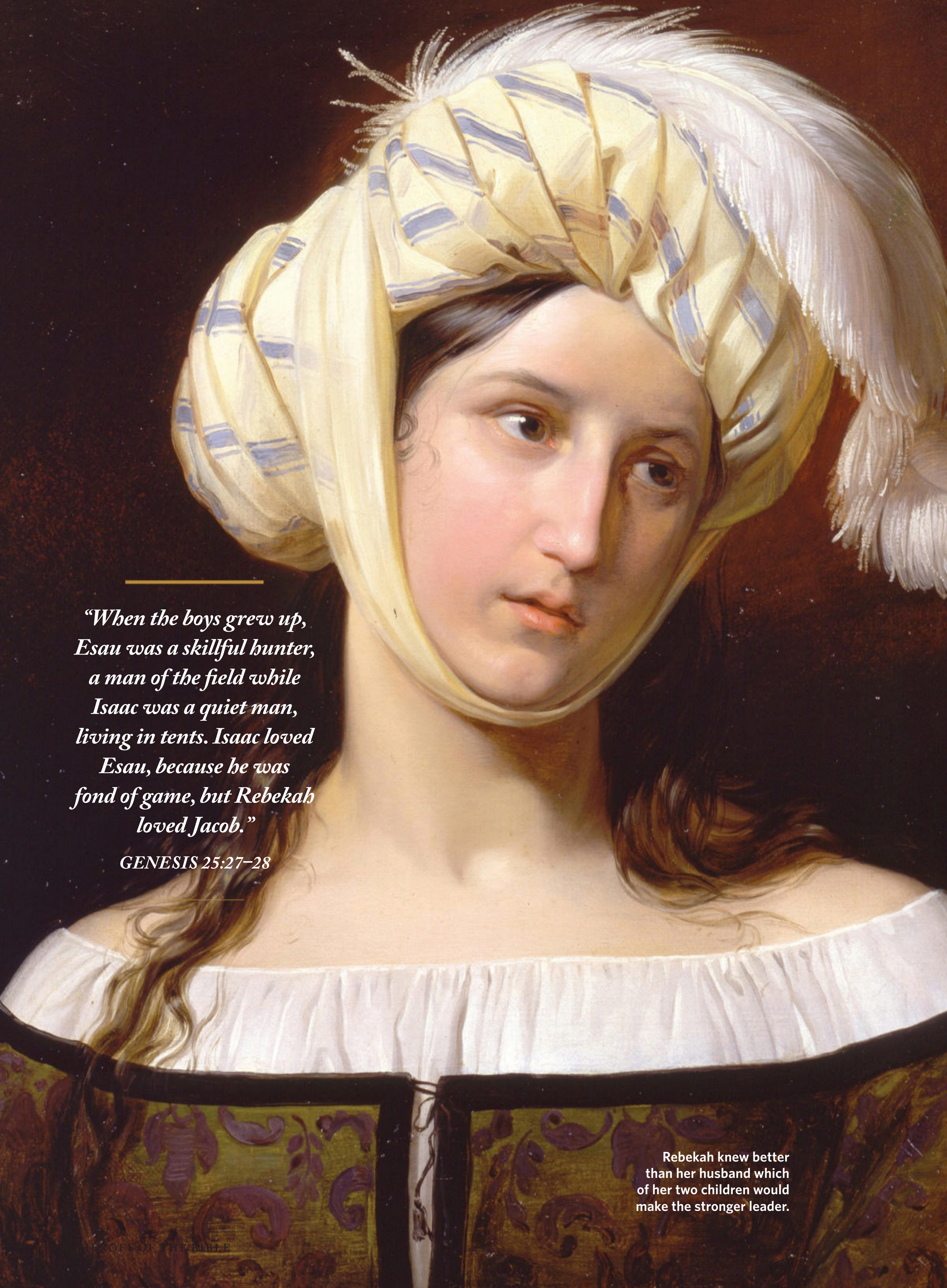
Years later, Sarah has grown old and increasingly skeptical of God's promise to Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as "the dust of the earth" and would possess a great land. Concluding that she is no longer able to bear children, she enlists Hagar, her handmaid and servant, to become her surrogate and give birth to the son who will fulfill God's promise. Abraham, according to custom, must accept this relatively common practice, though in doing so he too displays a lack of faith in God's promise. This arrangement creates considerable pain for both women and particularly for Hagar, who twice is driven to the wilderness by Sarah's jealousy and nearly killed before God's intervention saves the day. Sarah, too, despite her unbelief, is redeemed by God, as she miraculously conceives at last—she laughs at the prospect when she hears God's promise, transmitted to Abraham by a contingent of three divine messengers—giving birth to Isaac, the next in Israel's long line of patriarchs. "God has brought laughter for me," Sarah says, "everyone who hears will laugh with me. Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."





> *"God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and moreover I will give you a son by her.'"*
>
> *GENESIS 17:15–16*

Believing herself incapable of becoming pregnant, Sarah (top) presents Abraham with Hagar as a surrogate.



> *"When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field while Isaac was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob."*
>
> *GENESIS 25:27–28*

Rebekah knew better than her husband which of her two children would make the stronger leader.

Rebekah

A Trickster for the Ages

She engineers the most ingenious ruse in the Bible in securing Isaac's blessing for Jacob instead of older brother Esau.

We first encounter Rebekah striding toward a well in her hometown of Nahor. Abraham has sent his servant back from Canaan to Abraham's native country to seek a bride for his son Isaac. When the servant reaches the well, he watches the young women approach to draw water in the gathering dusk and prays to the Lord that whichever woman gives him water to drink and provides water for his camels might become the wife he is seeking for Isaac. Then, "before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah…coming out with her water jar on her shoulder. The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin whom no man has known." Sure enough, as the servant had hoped, Rebekah offers him a drink and then runs back to the well to draw enough water for his camels. She brings the servant to her household, where he meets Rebekah's brother, the crafty Laban, who surely perked up when he beheld the many treasures the servant brought with him, including a gold nose-ring and two gold bracelets that the servant had already given Rebekah. Soon the deal is consummated—the servant bestows riches on one and all—and Laban agrees to allow Rebekah to travel with the servant to Canaan to become Isaac's wife.

Next we encounter Rebekah as mother-to-be. Having waited a long time to conceive, she is suffering through a difficult pregnancy with twins, who seem to be constantly at war with each other in her womb. Here she takes the initiative, asking the Lord why she is suffering so. "Two nations are in your womb," the Lord tells her, "and two people born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." And indeed, Esau, the firstborn, hairy, impulsive, even foolish, ends up far less successful than his thoughtful, studious, introspective brother, Jacob.

Rebekah's final, crowning act of independence is the ruse she perpetrates on an ailing, near-blind Isaac. Sensing that he is near death, Isaac calls Esau to him, preparing to bestow upon him the blessing that is Esau's due as the firstborn. But first Isaac tells him to go hunt for the game that will be prepared for the meal to celebrate the blessing. Rebekah hears this exchange and immediately recruits Jacob into her scheme to steal the blessing for Jacob. While Esau is out hunting, she prepares the savory meal herself, then dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes—even including animal skins on his neck and hands to approximate the hairier Esau. The trick works, Isaac gives the blessing to Jacob, and Esau is furious. Rebekah may have perpetrated the hoax simply because she favored Jacob—she certainly did—but she also surely knew that the blessing would determine the future leader of Isaac's clan and there was no question that Jacob was infinitely more suited for that role than Esau.

Finally, the resourceful Rebekah, the driver of the story from start to finish, directs Jacob to flee from Esau's wrath to her brother Laban's farm.

Rachel

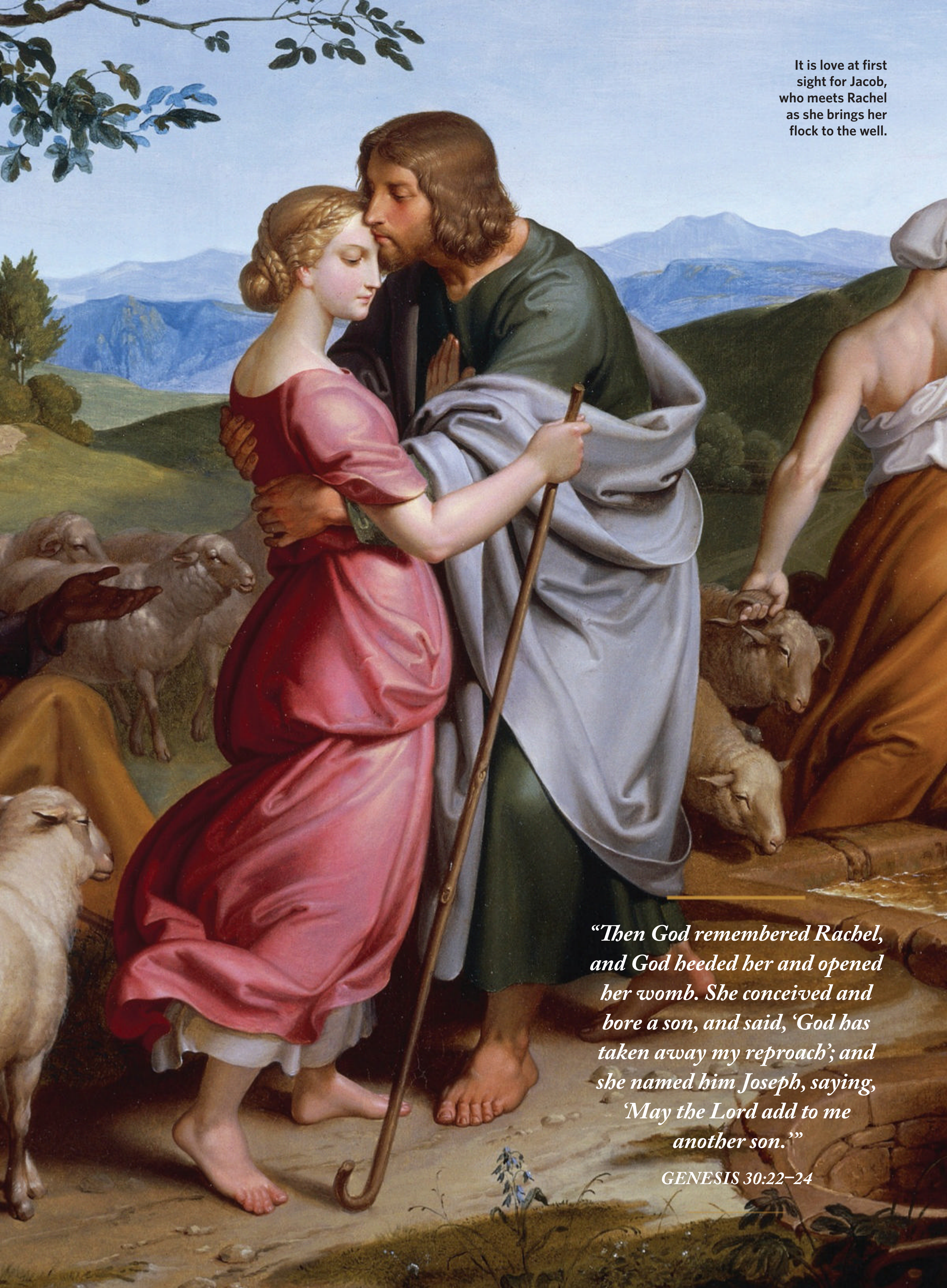
Beloved Wife

Jacob must wait seven years to marry her, but she rewards his patience with the child who will continue the saga of God's special relationship with his chosen people.

From the moment Jacob sees Rachel bringing her flock to a well to be watered, he is utterly smitten. What greater proof of that do we need than the fact that he is willing to accept her father Laban's demand that he first marry Rachel's elder sister Leah and then wait a full seven years before he is allowed to marry Rachel? The Bible tells us nothing of Rachel's feelings for Jacob; perhaps she is doomed, like Leah, to love someone who will never love her back. We know that Rachel envies her sister, to whom God grants the gift of children in compensation for the lack of love she experiences from her husband; and we know that in the end God hears her plea and "opens her womb," enabling her to give birth to two sons, one of whom, Joseph, will become the next key player in the drama of the chosen people after the death of his father, Jacob.

Later in the narrative, she plays the trickster—the Bible presents many of these—by stealing Laban's "household gods" during Jacob's hurried departure from Laban's farm. Scholars suggest that these were probably figures of some sort representing ancestral gods and establishing Laban's authority within the family as well as legitimating his property claims. Finding them missing and Jacob gone, Laban pursues him and his large entourage. When he catches up to his son-in-law, a thorough search of his camp fails to turn up any of the household gods, leading Jacob to criticize Laban harshly for chasing after him so aggressively. What Jacob does not know is that Rachel was the thief and that when Laban and his men entered her tent to search for the missing goods, she sat on them, telling Laban that she was unable to get up because she was menstruating. "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you," she tells her father, "for the way of women is upon me."

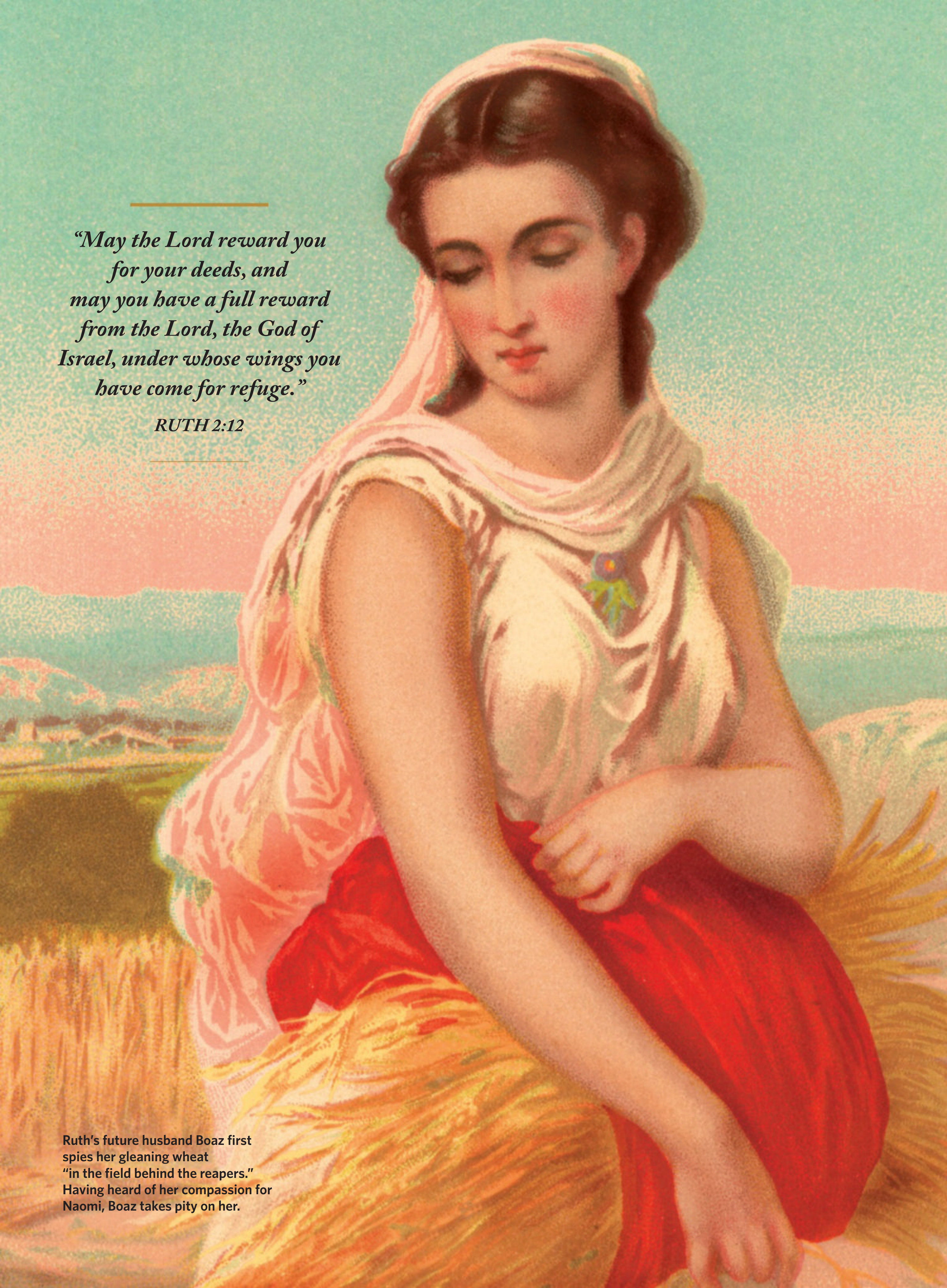
She is beautiful, she is envious and she is devious—some interpreters have connected these adjectives to suggest that Rachel is the Bible's version of a "material girl," but the birth of Joseph surely must have softened her considerably as she came to realize God's favor toward her.



It is love at first sight for Jacob, who meets Rachel as she brings her flock to the well.

"Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, 'God has taken away my reproach'; and she named him Joseph, saying, 'May the Lord add to me another son.'"

GENESIS 30:22–24



> *"May the Lord reward you*
> *for your deeds, and*
> *may you have a full reward*
> *from the Lord, the God of*
> *Israel, under whose wings you*
> *have come for refuge."*
>
> *RUTH 2:12*

Ruth's future husband Boaz first spies her gleaning wheat "in the field behind the reapers." Having heard of her compassion for Naomi, Boaz takes pity on her.

Ruth

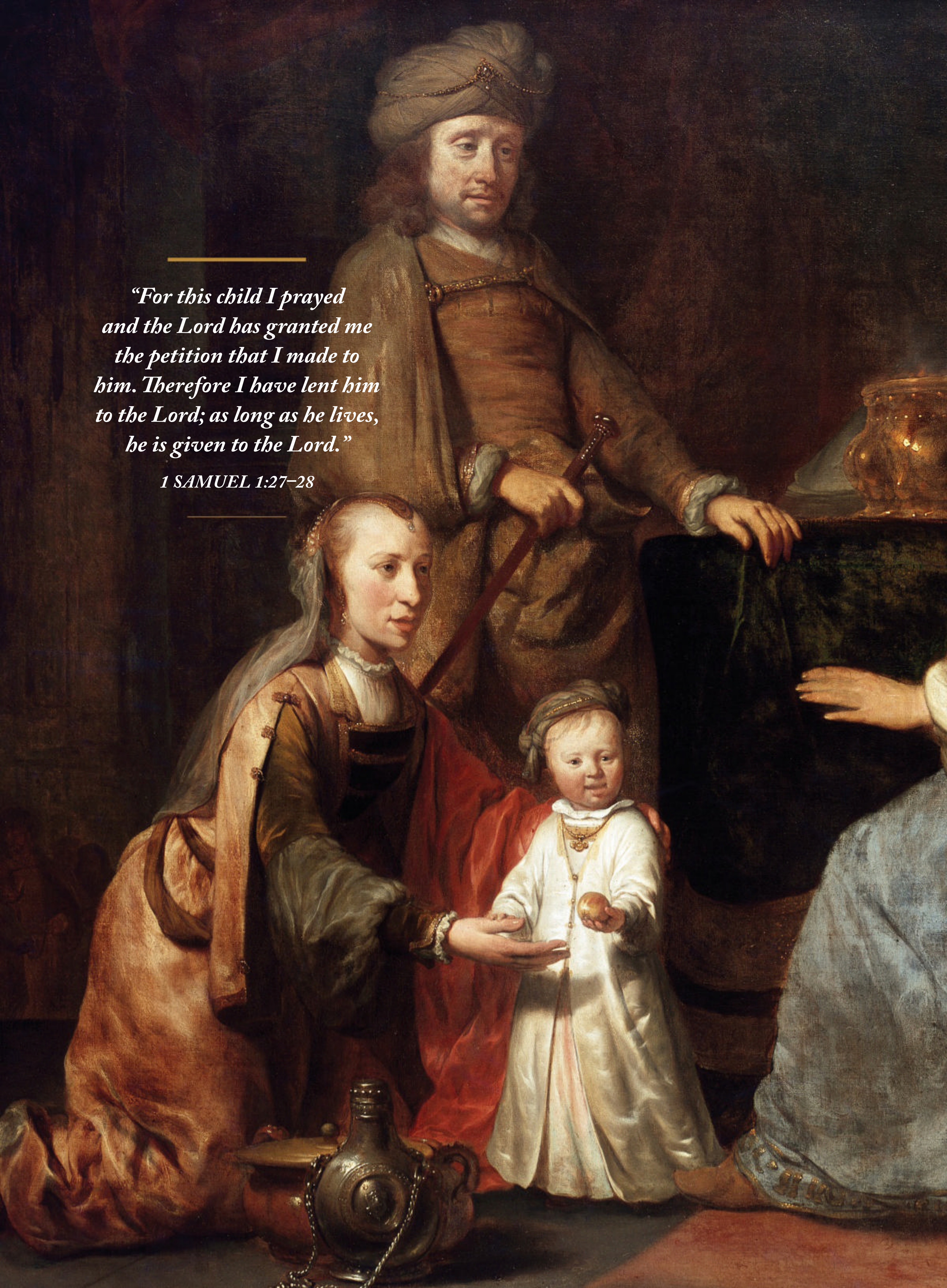
Loyal Daughter-in-Law

In an act of exceptional compassion, she braves a foreign, and frequently hostile, culture to support her mother-in-law.

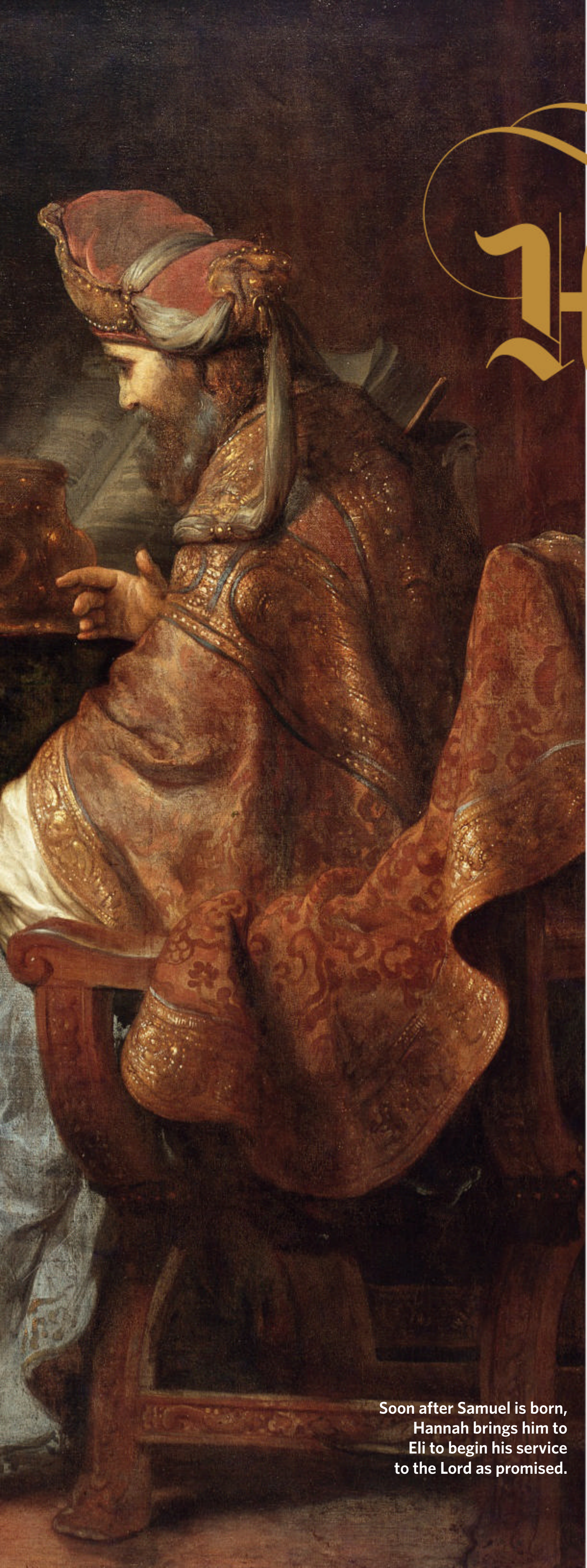
The heroism of tender Ruth is of a different order from the other figures we've discussed. She is not a prophet or a king or a great leader. She does not play a pivotal role in the history of Israel. She is not featured in Jewish or Christian liturgy. But her tale of unsolicited generosity to her mother-in-law Naomi remains one of the most profoundly moving sagas in the entire Bible. The story begins in tragedy: Naomi's husband and her two sons die, making widows of Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Decimated by her loss and convinced that the Lord has turned against her, Naomi decides to return from the country of Moab to her homeland in Bethlehem. Orpah and Ruth begin the journey, but soon after setting out, Naomi urges them to return to Moab, arguing that she is too old to give birth to additional sons to marry them, and even if she could conceive, would Orpah and Ruth wait until they were grown? She also must have had in her mind the fact that Moabites were not viewed favorably by her people and the two younger women were likely to face discrimination back in Judah. Orpah agrees and reluctantly turns back, but Ruth refuses, clinging to Naomi and entreating her: "Do not press me to leave you…. Where you go, I will go…your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried."

And so loyal and loving Ruth remains with her mother-in-law and travels to a strange land. It is a breathtaking leap of faith, for which she is wonderfully rewarded when she comes to the attention of a rich landowner named Boaz, who takes an immediate interest in her. Boaz praises her for her kindness to her mother-in-law in leaving her own father and mother and her native land to care for her. "May the Lord reward you for your deeds," he declares, "and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"

Soon the pair is wed and Ruth gives birth to a son, whom Naomi will love and serve as nurse. The local women tell her that the child "shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." The son's name was Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David, the great king of Israel, and an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth. And so a tale of extraordinary compassion and generosity, with a non-Israelite at its center, becomes the foundation of a family of vast importance to Christians and Jews alike.



> *"For this child I prayed and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord."*
>
> *1 SAMUEL 1:27–28*



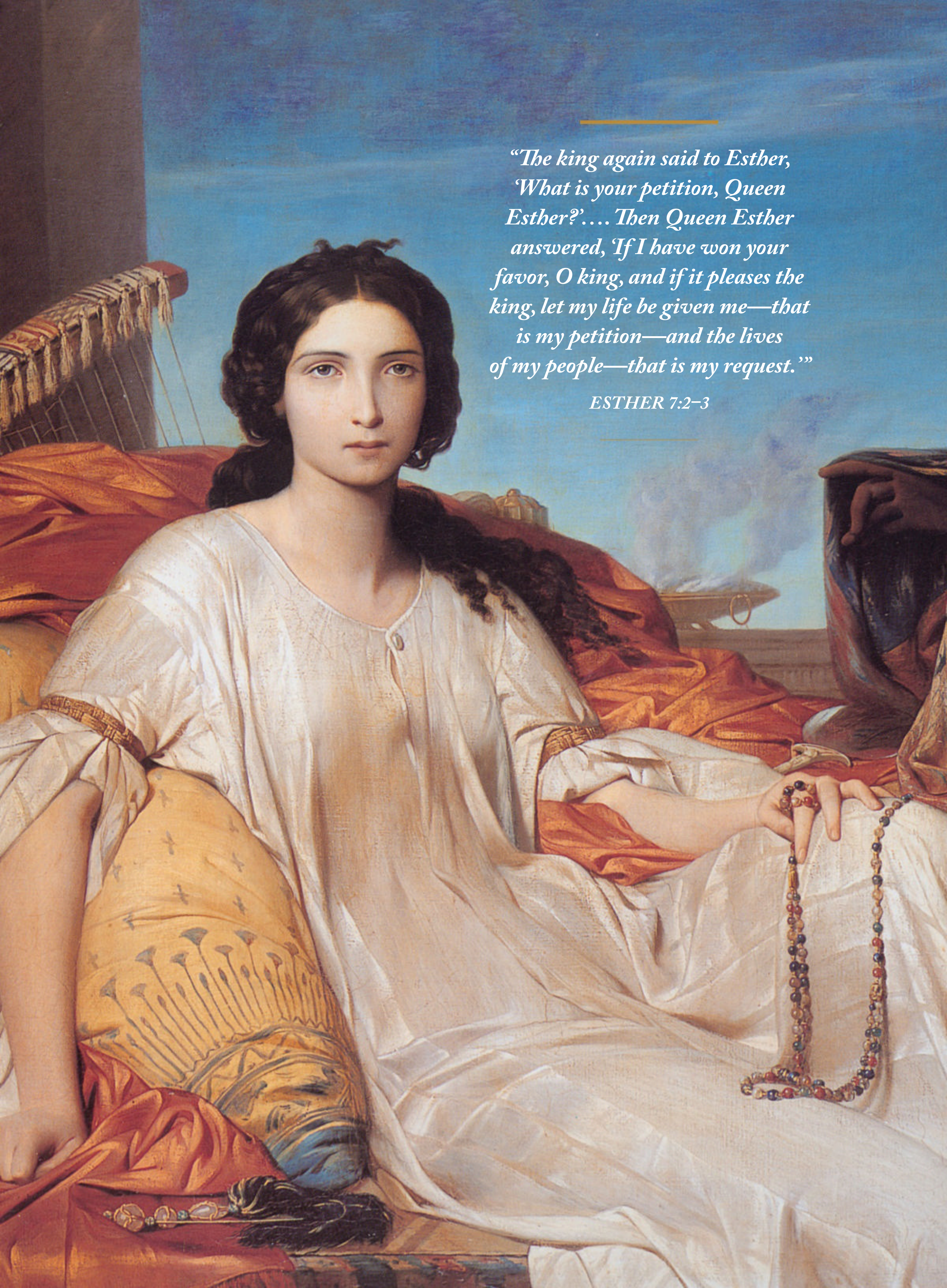
Soon after Samuel is born, Hannah brings him to Eli to begin his service to the Lord as promised.

Hannah

Woman of Faith

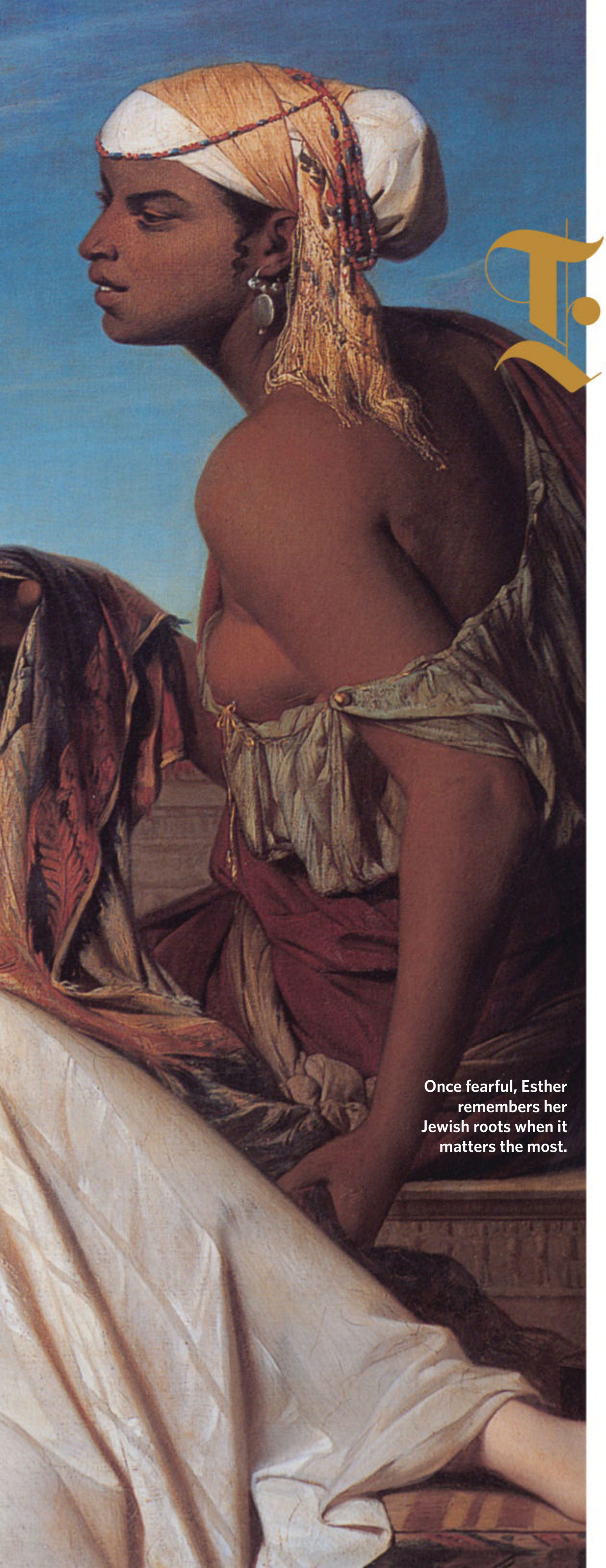
Her promise to give her long-hoped-for son to God foreshadows the story of God the Father sending his son to Earth to save humanity.

Hannah is one of several biblical women who beseech God for relief from their apparent inability to conceive a child, a reflection of how important childbearing was to the identity and status of women in the ancient world. Hannah's pain is exacerbated by the fact that Peninnah, the other wife of her husband, Elkanah, has given birth while Hannah has remained barren. In despair, she goes to the temple and prays to God for relief, promising that if God will grant her a son, she will dedicate him to God as "a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." Eli, the high priest, observing her weeping and noting that her lips were moving but no words were discernible, believes her to be drunk, but when Hannah explains her plight—"I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord"—he tells her: "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And so Hannah gives birth to a son, whom she names Samuel, meaning "heard by God." Later, she brings the boy to Eli, reminds him of their earlier meeting, and tells him that, "I have lent him [Samuel] to the Lord; as long as he lives he is given to the Lord." Samuel, conceived through his mother's devotion to God, would go on to become one of the great prophets and leaders of Israel.



“The king again said to Esther, ‘What is your petition, Queen Esther?’. . . . Then Queen Esther answered, ‘If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request.’”

ESTHER 7:2–3



Once fearful, Esther remembers her Jewish roots when it matters the most.

Esther

Her People's Savior

This clever queen reclaims her roots and saves the Hebrew people from destruction.

There are few figures in the Old Testament more appropriately described as heroes than the once unassuming Esther. A Jewish girl in the non-Jewish land of Persia, Esther grows into a beautiful and intelligent young woman under the tutelage of her uncle, Mordecai, who adopts her after the death of her parents. King Ahasuerus, frequently clueless and easily manipulated by his evil counselor Haman, has stripped the current Queen Vashti of her royal title after she refused a summons to come to court where he wished "to show the peoples and the officials her beauty." (Within the highly patriarchal Persian society, men were afraid that Vashti's disobedience might provoke widespread rebellion among their own wives; she was removed as queen in large part to reinforce the dominance of men.)

Now lacking a queen, the king ordered his minions to search throughout the land for a suitable replacement, and Esther, "fair and beautiful"—and clearly very sharp—impressed the king, who "loved Esther more than all the other women" and named her his new queen. At Mordecai's suggestion, Esther had been keeping her Jewish heritage a secret, but when Haman hatches a genocidal plot to murder the Jews throughout Persia, Esther reclaims her heritage and cleverly saves the day. In a satisfying reversal, Haman and his sons are hung on the very gallows Haman had constructed for Mordecai, and the would-be executioners throughout the land are killed by the Jewish communities they were sent to liquidate. And Esther—wise, strong Queen Esther—becomes the founder of the Jewish holiday of Purim, which celebrates the saving of her people.

Holy Ground

These ancient biblical sites remain popular destinations for believers from all around the globe.

While many of the locations in the Old Testament are difficult to pinpoint, there are a host of others that have been definitively identified as corresponding to biblical descriptions, even if we cannot absolutely establish that the events in the Bible actually took place there. Many of these have been sacred destinations for believers for centuries. Here are several of the most prominent:

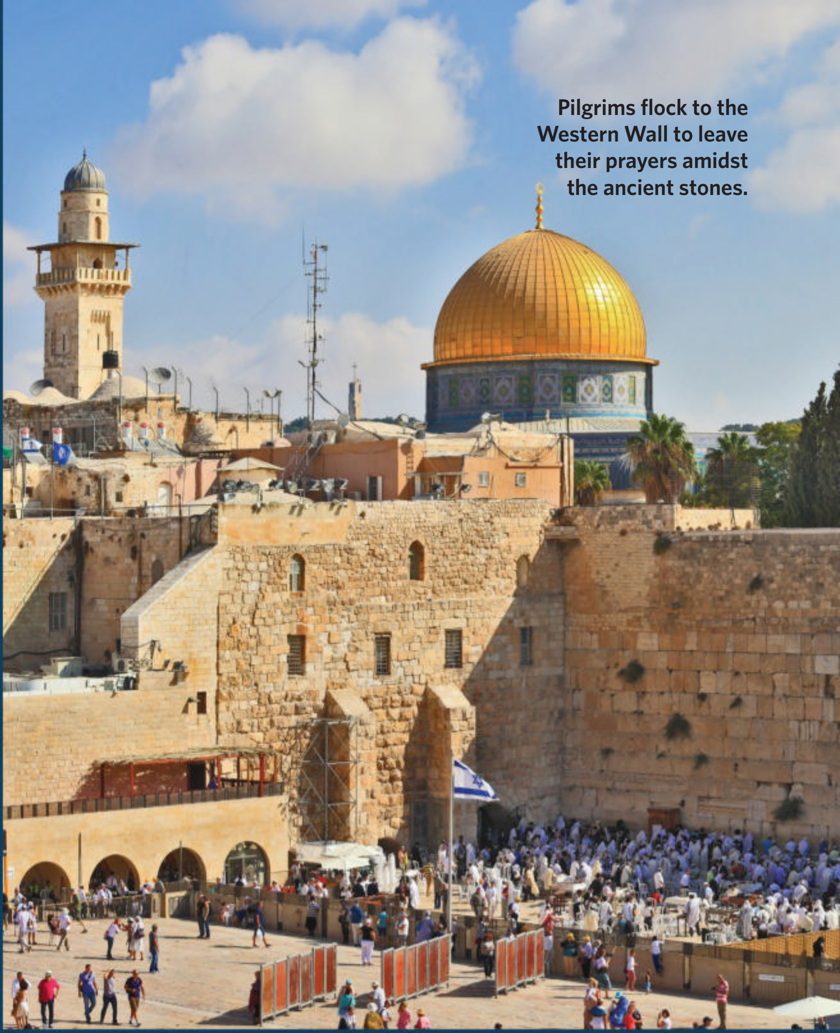
Ever since the 11th century, **Mount Ararat** in eastern Turkey has been seen as the place where Noah's Ark came to rest after the biblical flood subsided. Its peak at over 11,000 feet could have supported the ark for some time as the waters slowly receded in the surrounding countryside at lower elevations. The remoteness of the location and difficulty of access has limited its potential as a tourist attraction, not to mention the fact that the Turkish government has now declared it a military restricted zone.

The **Western Wall** in Jerusalem, by contrast, is visited every day by thousands of pilgrims, who stand before it, whisper prayers into the spaces separating its large blocks of limestone, and sometimes slip bits of paper inscribed with petitions to God into the cracks. The reverence with which believers approach it reflects its history as the remnant of the wall that once surrounded the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and its proximity to the Temple Mount, the former location of the temples themselves. It is open to the public 24 hours a day.

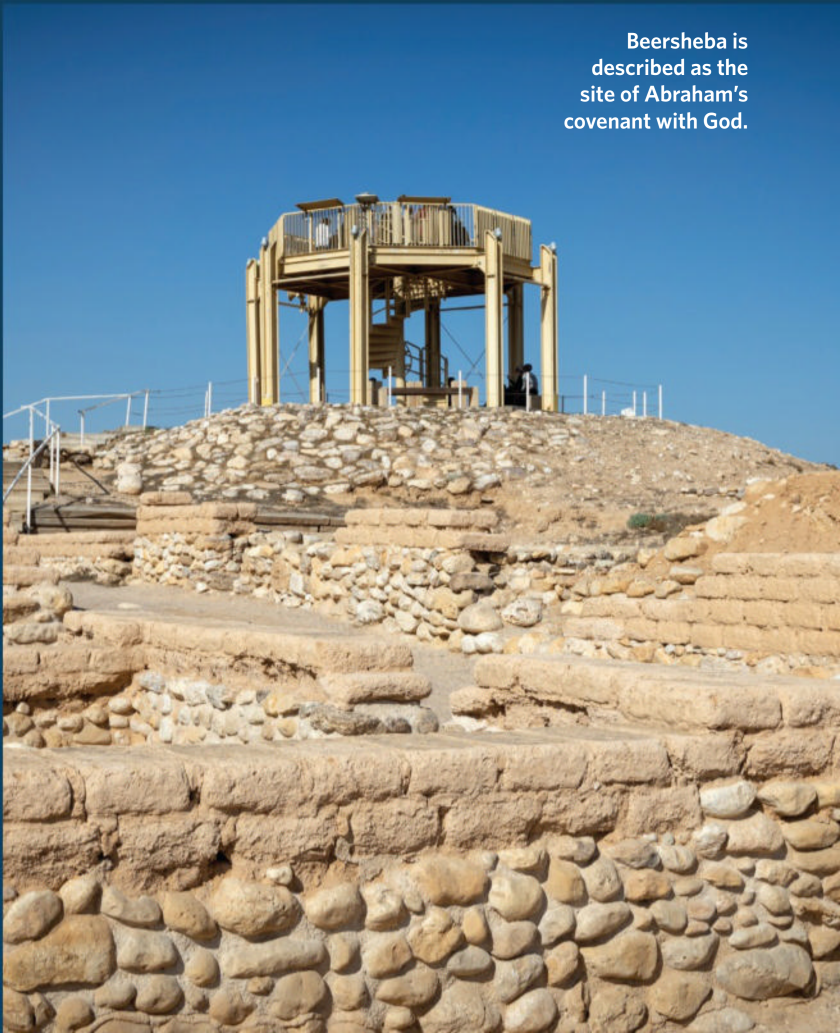
Some 18 miles southeast of contemporary Haifa, Israel, lies **Megiddo**, an ancient city, cited in the Bible as rebuilt and fortified during the reign of Solomon. Its location on an important trade route linking Egypt and Assyria made it a frequent battleground through its many millennia of settlement, from a battle in the 15th century BCE between a collection of local rulers against the Egyptians (led by Thutmose III, who may have been Moses' great antagonist in the Book of Exodus) to a conflict between King Josiah of Judah and Egypt in 609 BCE. Archaeologists have excavated an astonishing 26 different layers of habitation in Megiddo, each representing a different era of settlement.

The ancient city of **Beersheba** (located in southern Israel several miles east of the contemporary city of the same name) is a sacred site immortalized in Genesis as the place where Abraham made an important covenant with Philistine King Abimelech, enabling the two peoples to live together in peace. "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the Philistines."

Sadly, Mount Ararat can only be experienced from afar.


Pilgrims flock to the Western Wall to leave their prayers amidst the ancient stones.

Megiddo has been occupied by a plethora of different cultures.


Beersheba is described as the site of Abraham's covenant with God.

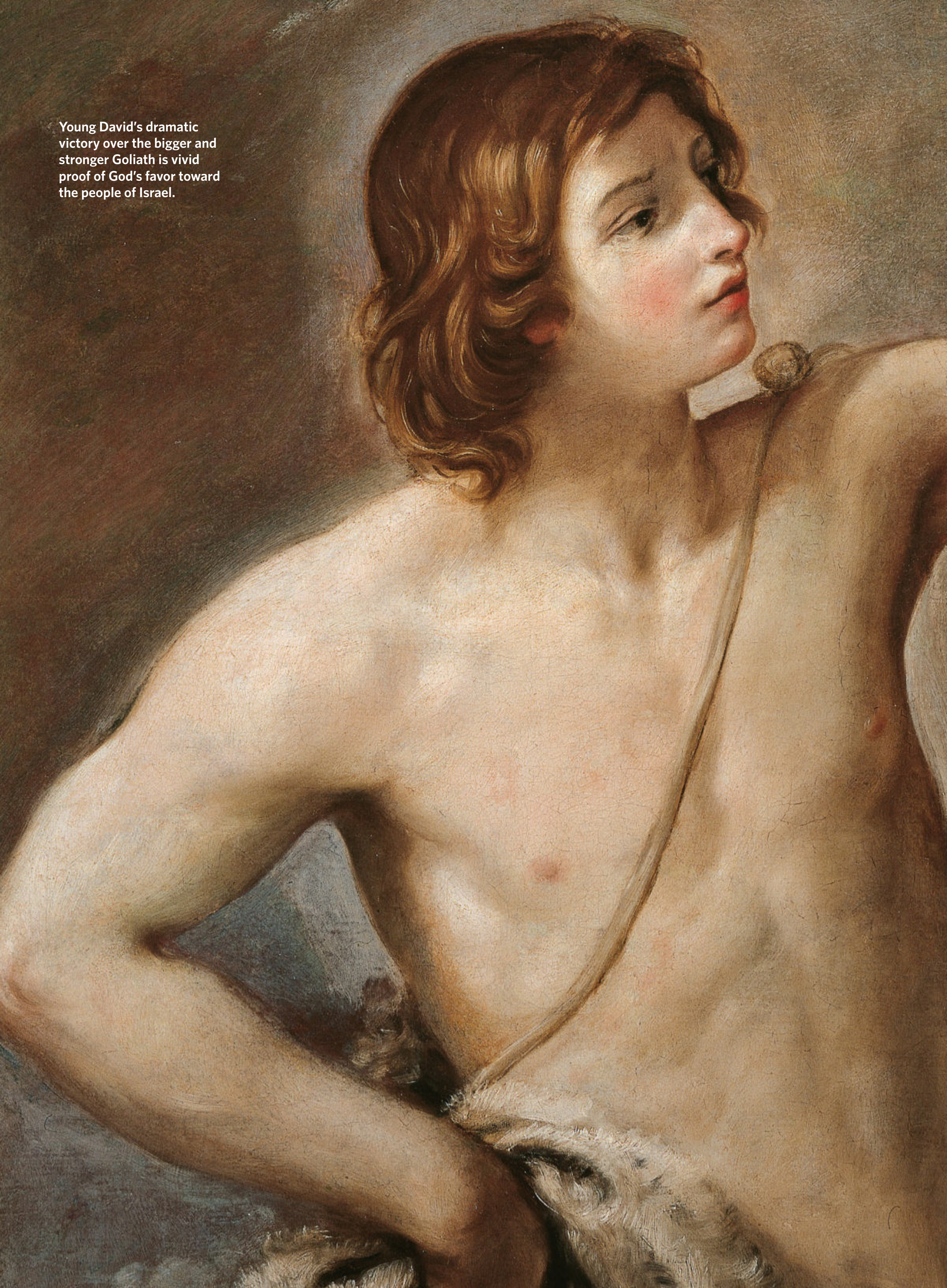
Bethlehem is a sacred city for Jews and Christians alike.

An ancient church on Mount Nebo was excavated in the 1930s.

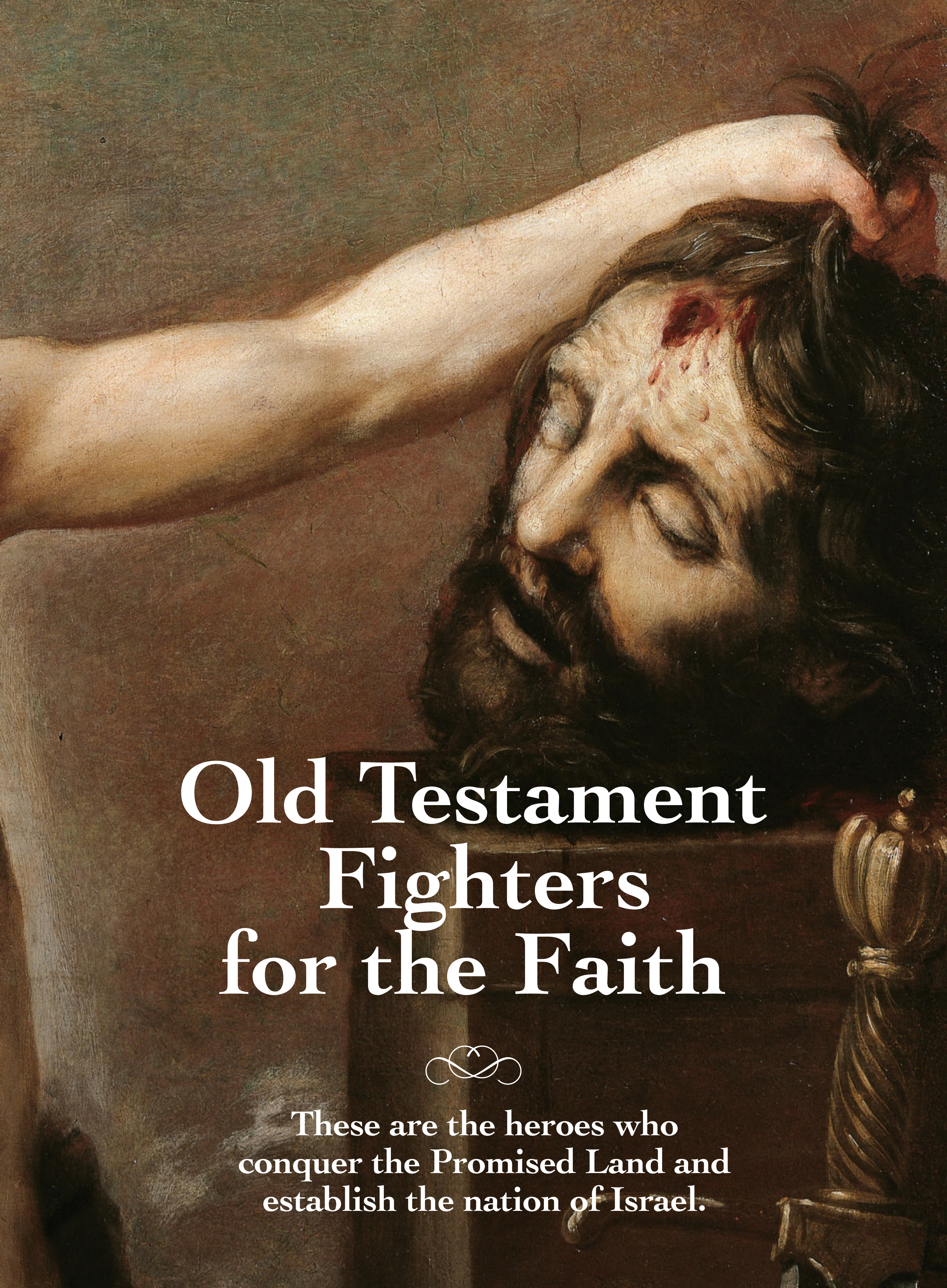
Beersheba is also identified as the place where God renewed His covenant with Isaac. “From there he [Isaac] went up to Beersheba. And that very night the Lord appeared to him and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham’s sake.’ So he built an altar there, called on the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there.”

The town of **Bethlehem**, revered by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus, is also honored in the Old Testament as the place where the great Israelite matriarch Rachel (see more on page 42), wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph, was buried. Her tomb, controlled by the Israelis since the 1967 Six-Day War, is a site of deep significance to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, all of whom honor Rachel as an important figure in the story of God’s relationship to humanity. (Jacob and Joseph are both frequently mentioned in the Koran.) Sadly, access to the site has become a source of frequent controversy through the years as Palestinians and Israelis have made competing claims on the space.

At the end of his long life, Moses was given a glimpse of the Promised Land. “Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to **Mount Nebo**... and the Lord showed him the whole land.... The Lord said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.” Ever since the fourth century, believers have flocked to this sacred destination in Jordan, with its breathtaking views of the valley below. An ancient church, erected in the Byzantine era, was excavated in the 1930s, revealing stunning mosaics, since restored and preserved for posterity and the enjoyment of the site’s many visitors.



Young David's dramatic victory over the bigger and stronger Goliath is vivid proof of God's favor toward the people of Israel.



Old Testament Fighters for the Faith

These are the heroes who conquer the Promised Land and establish the nation of Israel.

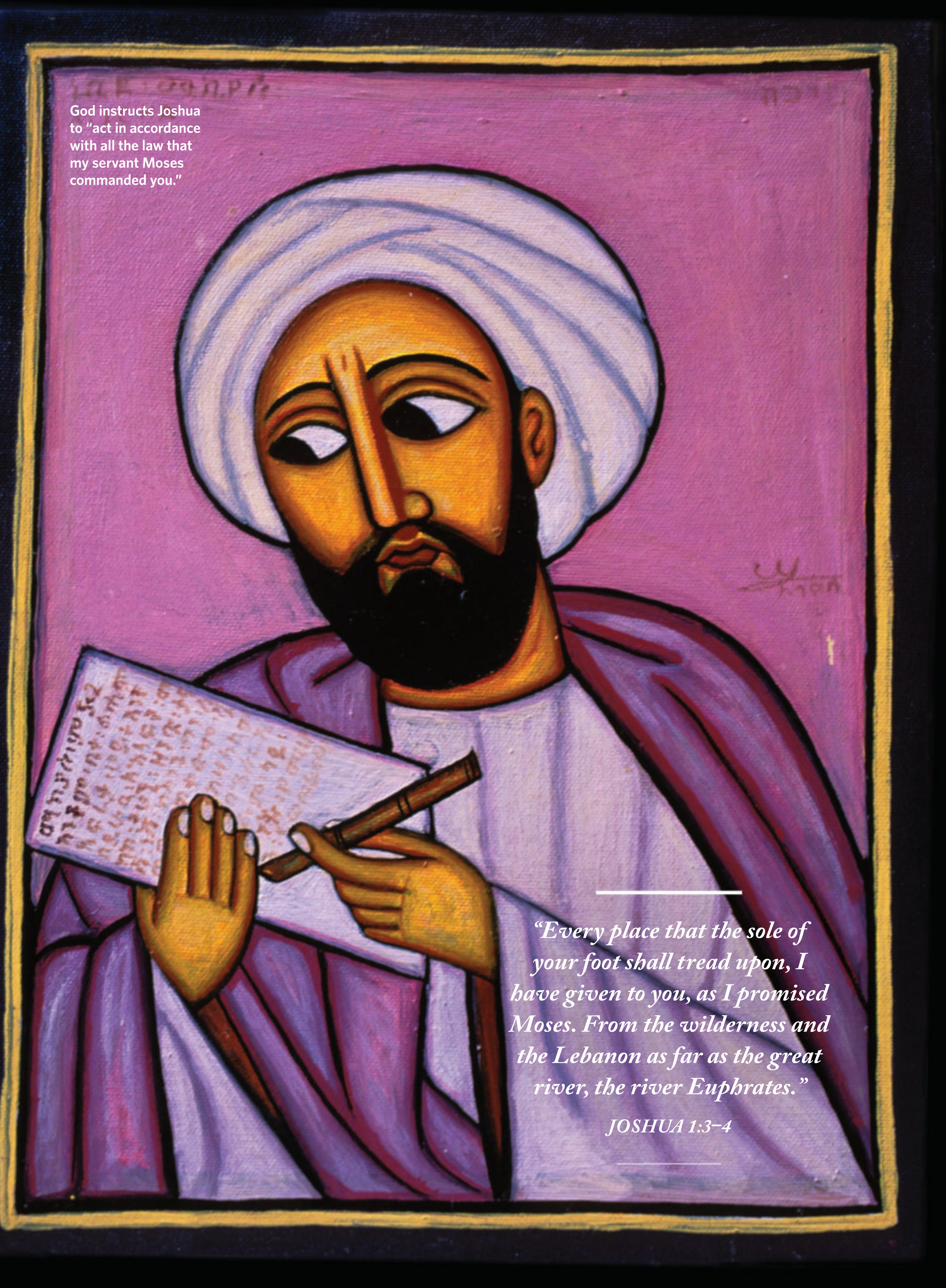
Joshua

Mighty Warrior

Picking up the mantle of leadership from Moses, he leads his people into the Promised Land and begins the conquest of Canaan.

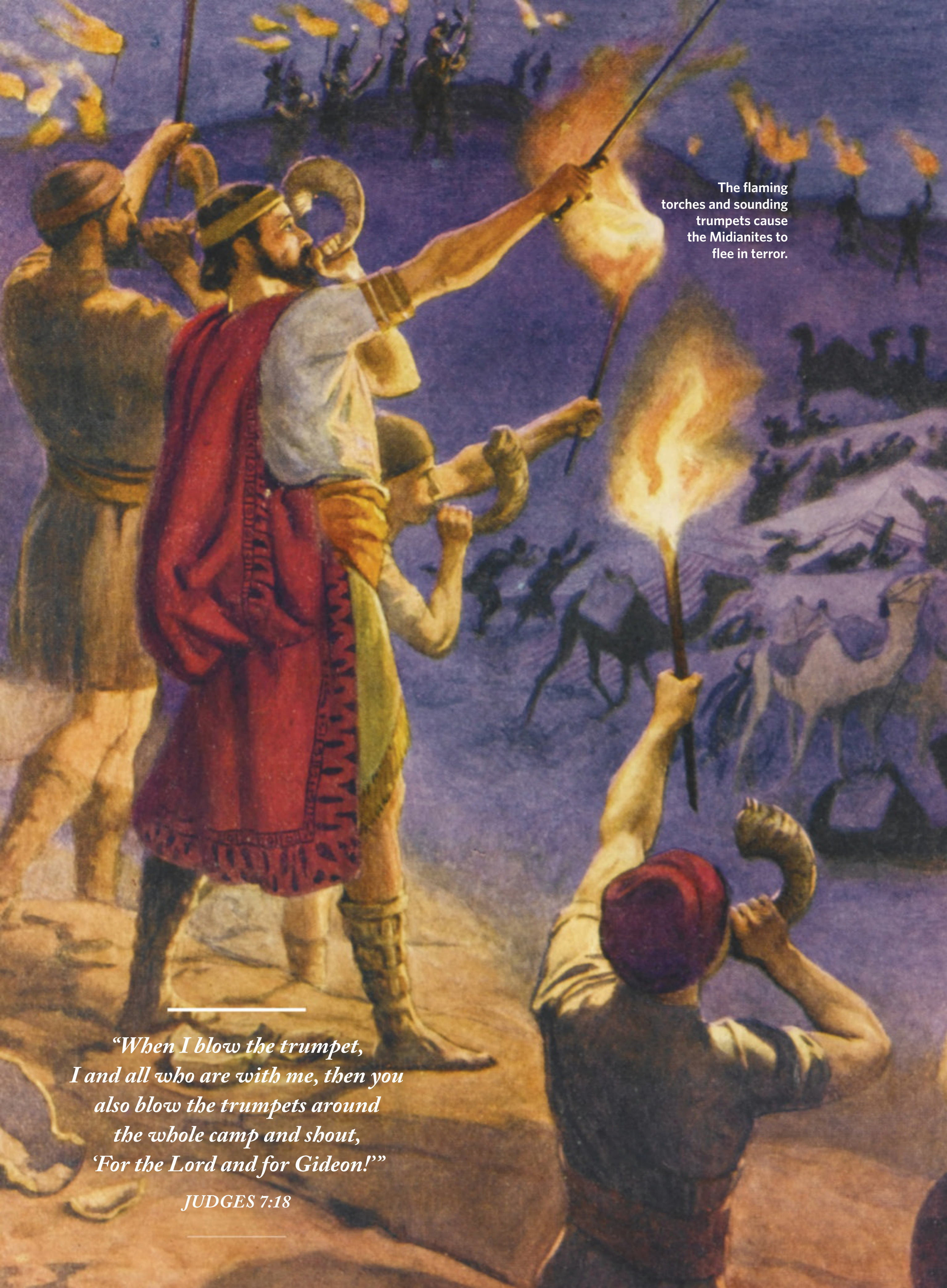
Joshua is the great military leader of the Old Testament, taking up the mantle of leadership from Moses just as the Israelites are ready to enter and assume possession of the land promised to them by God. His story has parallels with that of Moses, though the text leaves little doubt that Moses is the greater of the two. Like Moses, Joshua sends a pair of spies into Jericho to make an assessment of the Canaanite readiness for battle. They are protected by a prostitute named Rahab, a hero in her own right, who hides the spies on her roof among "stalks of flax." After completing their reconnaissance, the spies tell Rahab to tie a crimson cord in the window through which she will lower the men to the ground outside the city walls, so the Israelite soldiers will know to spare her and her family when they invade Jericho. Soon the spies return with a happy verdict: The Canaanites are so fearful of the Israelites and of the mighty God who protects them that they are unlikely to put up much of a fight. Confident of victory and directed by God, Joshua orders his forces into Canaan. But first Joshua performs a miracle, parting the waters of the Jordan River, as Moses did at the Red Sea, to allow his soldiers and all the people to make their way westward into the Promised Land. News of this amazing event spreads throughout the region, further arousing fear among the local populace. Joshua and his men then stream into Canaan, utterly obliterating all opposition in their path.

The climax of the story is the Battle of Jericho, a heavily fortified city with a seemingly impregnable wall surrounding it. God commands Joshua and his men to march around the city once a day for six days. Then, on the seventh day, God directs the Israelites to march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing their trumpets. Finally, "when they [the priests] make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and all the people shall charge straight ahead." And so it came to pass just as the Lord had foretold. "Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys." The conquest of Canaan was underway.



God instructs Joshua to "act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you."

> *"Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, I have given to you, as I promised Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates."*
>
> *JOSHUA 1:3–4*



The flaming torches and sounding trumpets cause the Midianites to flee in terror.

“When I blow the trumpet,
I and all who are with me, then you
also blow the trumpets around
the whole camp and shout,
‘For the Lord and for Gideon!’”

JUDGES 7:18

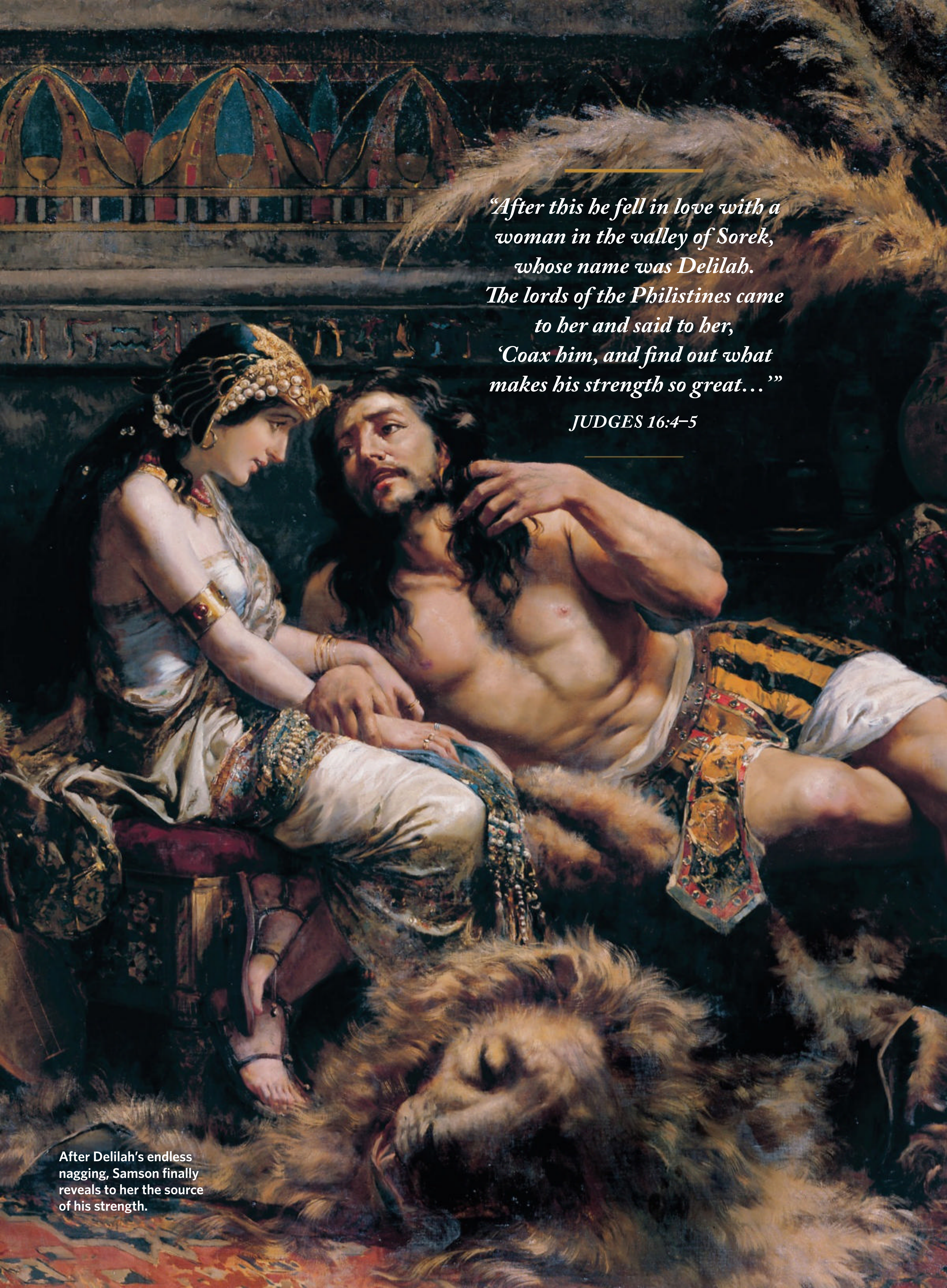
Gideon

Skeptical Leader

Instructed by God to limit his force to just 300 men, he still manages to rout the Midianites, proving that God's dominion extends to the battlefield.

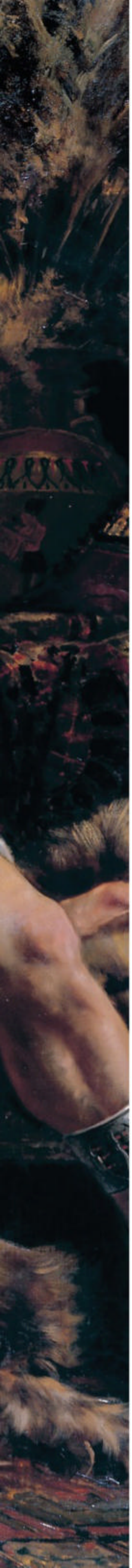
With Deborah as judge and prophet, the people of Israel enjoyed 40 years of peace. But, as happens over and over again throughout the Old Testament, the people are soon seduced yet again by the Canaanite gods, in this case the fertility god Baal and his female counterpart, Asherah. In punishment for this transgression, God has allowed the Israelites to be dominated by the Midianites, who routinely plunder their lands, steal their crops and appropriate their livestock. By the time God calls Gideon to rescue his people, the Israelites are consistently hiding their goods from this looting in hopes of simply being able to survive. Like Moses and so many before him, Gideon sees himself as unworthy. "My clan is the weakest in Manasseh," he tells the Lord, "and I am the least [the youngest] in my family." So skeptical is he of his commissioning by God, Gideon repeatedly petitions God to prove his divinity through a series of requests that the Lord surprisingly accepts without objection. The final test calls for God to drop dew on "a fleece of wool" one morning while leaving the surrounding land dry, then leaving the fleece dry and the surrounding ground covered with dew on the next.

Convinced at last, Gideon begins to amass his troops for an assault on the Midianites. Soon he has an impressive force of 30,000 men at his disposal, an army that the Lord deems so large that a victory will seem to be the result of military superiority rather than due to divine intervention. But God instructs Gideon to winnow his troops down through a series of measures that eventually reduce Gideon's forces to just 300 men. A nighttime raid soon follows and the Midianites are so terrified by the sound of the Israelite trumpets and the sight of their flaming torches that they either flee or turn their swords on one another. The rout is on and God's primacy is reestablished throughout the land. Sadly, we learn that "as soon as Gideon died, the Israelites relapsed and prostituted themselves with the Baals…the Israelites did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side." They would need to be rescued once again from themselves.



> *"After this he fell in love with a*
> *woman in the valley of Sorek,*
> *whose name was Delilah.*
> *The lords of the Philistines came*
> *to her and said to her,*
> *'Coax him, and find out what*
> *makes his strength so great…'"*
>
> *JUDGES 16:4–5*

After Delilah's endless nagging, Samson finally reveals to her the source of his strength.



Samson

God's Strongman

Possessed of superhuman strength but betrayed by the treacherous Delilah, he triumphs in a final act of self-sacrifice.

The tales of Samson often feel as if they are drawn from an ancient book of folklore, so fantastical are many of their elements. In fact, his origin story sounds similar to that of many of the leaders, prophets and judges we have read about before Samson: He is born to yet another woman once believed to be infertile, and an angel tells his parents "no razor is to come on his head, for the boy is to be a Nazirite [meaning one separated or consecrated] to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines." But from that moment forward his story diverges dramatically from the norm. Samson does not speak words of condemnation like the great prophets. He does not lead a military force like many of the judges. He does not display great wisdom and patience like so many of the leaders who preceded him. On the contrary, he is impulsive, violent and at times, colossally stupid.

He is also, of course, colossally strong, capable of truly Herculean feats. First, he meets an unfortunate lion that he tears apart barehanded. Next, in a fit of anger, he murders 30 men from the town of Ashkelon. Then he catches 300 foxes, ties their tails together in pairs, places a torch in the knot between each pair and sends the foxes into the fields of the Philistines to destroy their crops. When the Philistines come after him for this destructive act, he kills a force of 1,000 men with the "fresh jawbone of a donkey." The Bible does not tell us how he wields this mighty weapon.

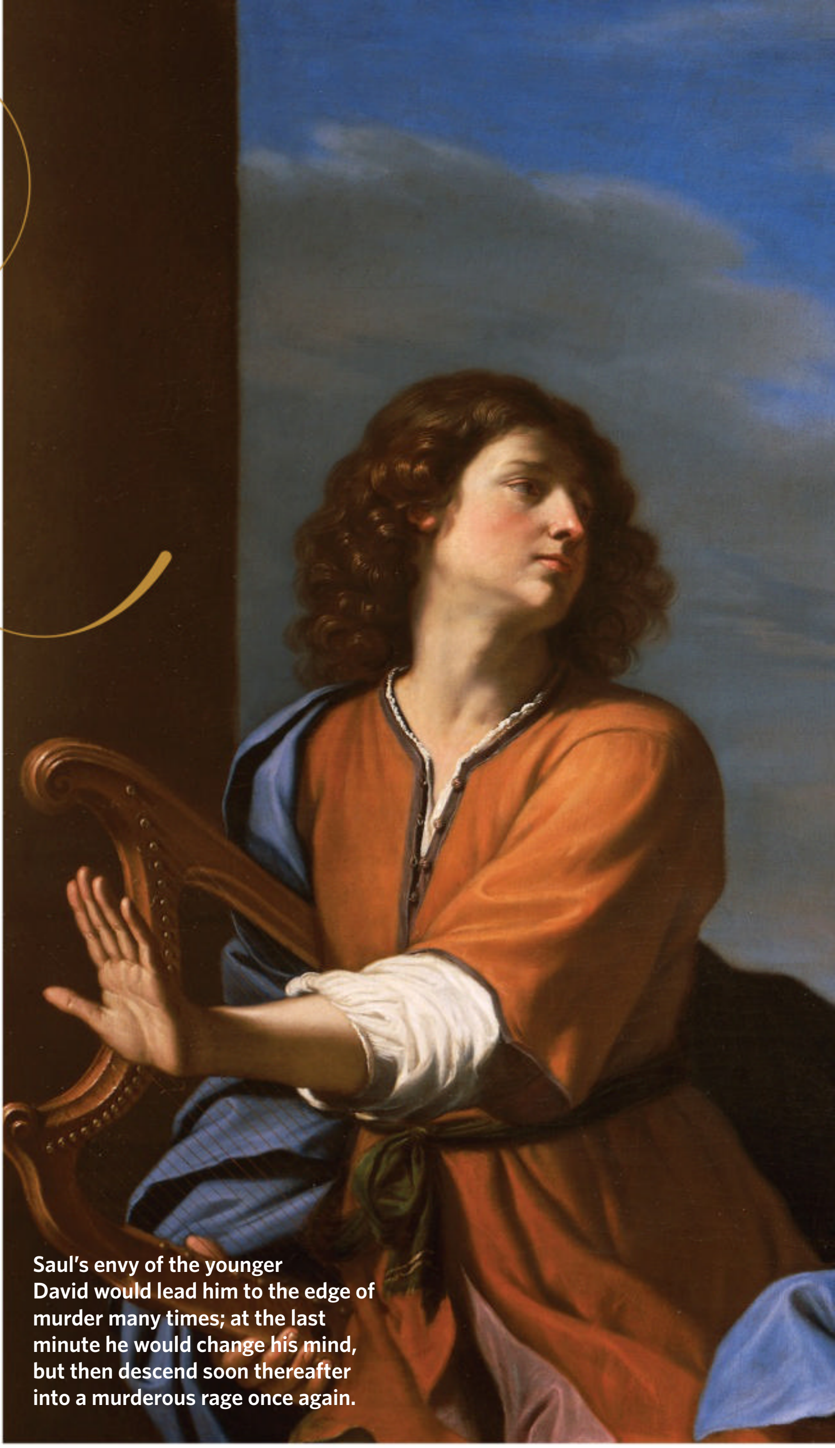
His judgment about women is consistently faulty. First, he persuades his parents to let him marry a Philistine woman, who promptly betrays him by revealing the answer to a riddle he has posed to the men of Timnah. Later he goes to the home of a prostitute, where the Gazites—Gaza was the southernmost city in Philistine, on the Mediterranean coast—plan to attack him, until Samson rises at midnight and puts the entire gate of the city on his back on his way out of town. Apparently, this display of strength persuaded the Gazites to leave him alone.

Finally, there is Delilah, the only woman with whom Samson is described as falling in love. Did Delilah seduce Samson with the intent of betraying him? That is not clear, but once the Philistines come calling with the offer of several thousand pieces of silver—a small fortune—she gladly accepts the assignment to destroy her lover. Three times she asks Samson to tell her the source of his exceptional strength; three times he gives her answers that prove bogus when the Philistines arrive to capture him. Finally, the Bible reports that, "after she had nagged him with her words day after day," he tells her that if he is deprived of his magnificent mane of hair, he will lose his strength and be as other men. Delilah promptly calls in a barber to shear Samson's locks while he is sleeping so Samson cannot defend himself when the Philistines arrive to seize him and gouge out his eyes. But Samson has one final heroic act to perform: When the Philistines bring him to their celebratory party in order to mock him, Samson, having begged God for a last burst of strength, is able to pull down the pillars of the house in which the Philistine lords are gathered, killing them all, but losing his own life in the process. One clear lesson from the Samson saga: God will use any instrument to maintain his covenant with the Israelites, even a vessel as flawed as Samson.

Saul

Flawed Monarch

A mighty military commander and his people's first king, he is undone by his jealousy of the charismatic David.

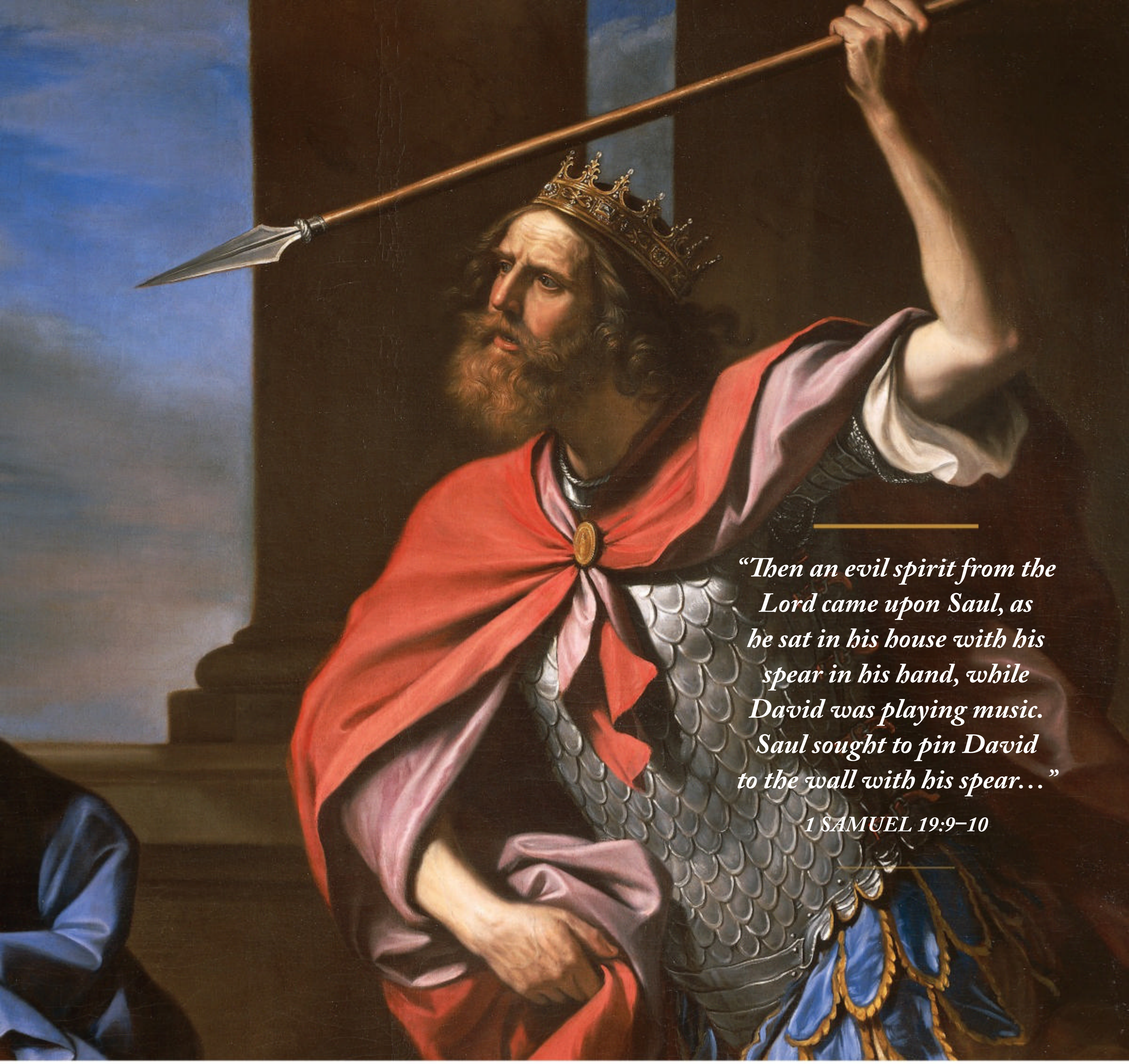


Saul's envy of the younger David would lead him to the edge of murder many times; at the last minute he would change his mind, but then descend soon thereafter into a murderous rage once again.

Saul is surely among the most fascinating, tortured and unmistakably human figures in the entire Bible. He is both hero and villain, faithful servant and jealous sinner. As we read his story, we feel sympathy at one moment, enmity in the next.

The people of Israel, dissatisfied as always, tell Samuel, the great prophet and judge, that they wish to be like other nations and be ruled by a king, instead of by the somewhat informal system of judges currently in place. Samuel is "displeased" by the request, but he takes the people's entreaty to God, who directs Samuel to describe for the people all the many ways a king will dominate their lives; when they continue to foment for the idea, God grudgingly tells Samuel to anoint Saul as their king. Saul certainly seems custom-made for the part. The Bible says of him: "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else." Thus Samuel "took a vial of oil and poured it on his [Saul's] head, and kissed him; he said, 'The Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the Lord and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around.'" Thus Saul becomes the first king of Israel. But somehow, despite the pomp surrounding his accession, the fact that God was reluctant to anoint a king in the first place seems to foreshadow the troubles to come.

Saul proves himself every bit the military leader the people had hoped for, vanquishing the enemies of Israel at every turn. He makes the proper sacrifices, and even gets caught up in the religious ecstasy of the prophets—described as "a prophetic frenzy"—when they approach him filled with the spirit of God. But he quickly begins getting into trouble with God for a series of misdeeds. His early offenses sound relatively minor to our ears: First, he makes a sacrifice before he was directed to by Samuel; next, despite being told to destroy the Amalekites, along with all their worldly goods, Saul allows his soldiers to keep the Amalekite livestock. These transgressions alone are enough for Samuel to declare, "The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever; but now your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be ruler over his people."



> *"Then an evil spirit from the Lord came upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand, while David was playing music. Saul sought to pin David to the wall with his spear…"*
>
> *1 SAMUEL 19:9–10*

Had the story of Saul ended here, we might have felt sorry for him, pushed from his throne for seemingly understandable mistakes. But soon we learn of the evil, violent moods that come over the king and drive him to destructive anger. And when this rage becomes directed obsessively against the up-and-coming David, we come to see Saul as a vindictive, jealous despot, desperately holding onto power in the face of a younger, more charismatic leader. From the moment of David's dramatic encounter with Goliath (see page 64), Saul cycles between fatherly love for David and vindictive, murderous hatred. David repeatedly attempts to make peace with Saul, and again and again Saul softens, then is overcome with his dark fury once more. In the end, faced with a powerful Philistine force and fearful for his own life, Saul persuades a local seer to summon the ghost of now deceased Samuel from beyond the grave. "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up," says Samuel…. "Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you today. Moreover, the Lord will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me." The next day, as predicted, Saul and his sons are dead, and Israel is defeated. It will take a new king to redeem the nation.

David

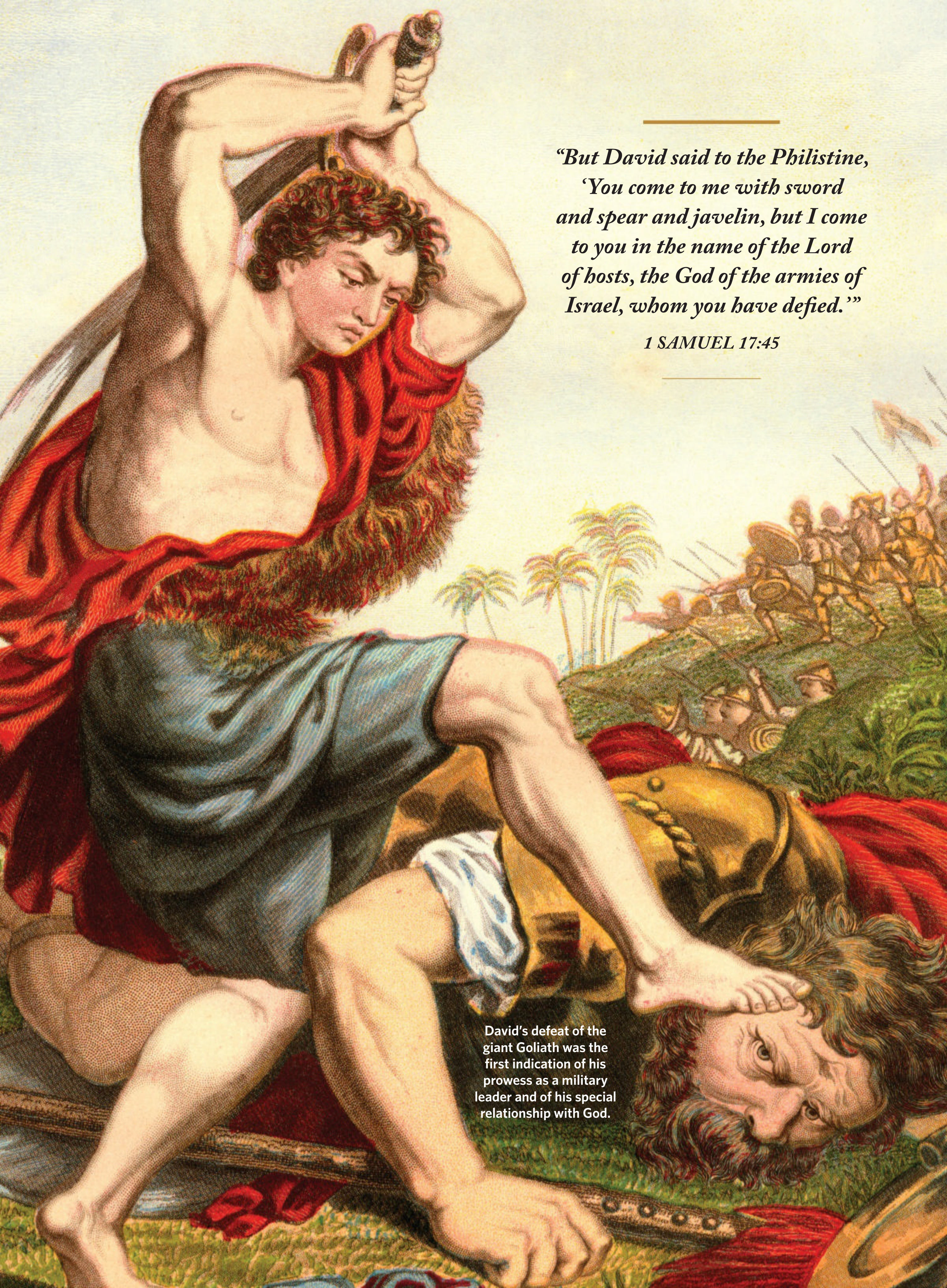
King of Kings

He rallies the Israelites and defeats the Philistines, establishing the monarchy on a firmer footing after Saul's tumultuous reign.

Did the biblical writers paint Saul in such dark tones in order to fully justify the primacy of David's rule and of the lineage that succeeded him? We will never know, but from the beginning, the contrast between the moody, vindictive Saul and the warm, charismatic David could not be greater. David first appears in the text as a young man, a boy really, taken into King Saul's court to play the lyre to soothe the spirits of the troubled king. He becomes Saul's "armor-bearer," much loved by the king. "And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him." (There is a short passage before this in which Samuel anoints David as the new king, but this appears out of order since it will be some time before Saul is killed and David ascends to the throne.)

Next is the dramatic tale of David's encounter with the massive Philistine Goliath, described as a "champion," "whose height was six cubits and a span [approximately 9 feet]…the weight of his coat was five thousand shekels of bronze…the shaft of his spear weighed six hundred shekels of iron." He challenges the Israelites to put forth a champion to fight him, with the forces of the vanquished fighter to become servants of the victor. "When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid." As we know, young David accepts the challenge, despite the scoffing of his elder brothers and the doubts of Saul, who says, "You are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David persists and eventually receives Saul's blessing. The armor they offer David is too heavy and unwieldy, so he faces the heavily armored giant with nothing but his slingshot and a bag of stones, slung over his shoulder. "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin," he tells Goliath, "but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts." As we all know, soon after the fight begins, a stone from David's slingshot sinks into Goliath's forehead and the giant falls facedown on the ground, dead on the spot.

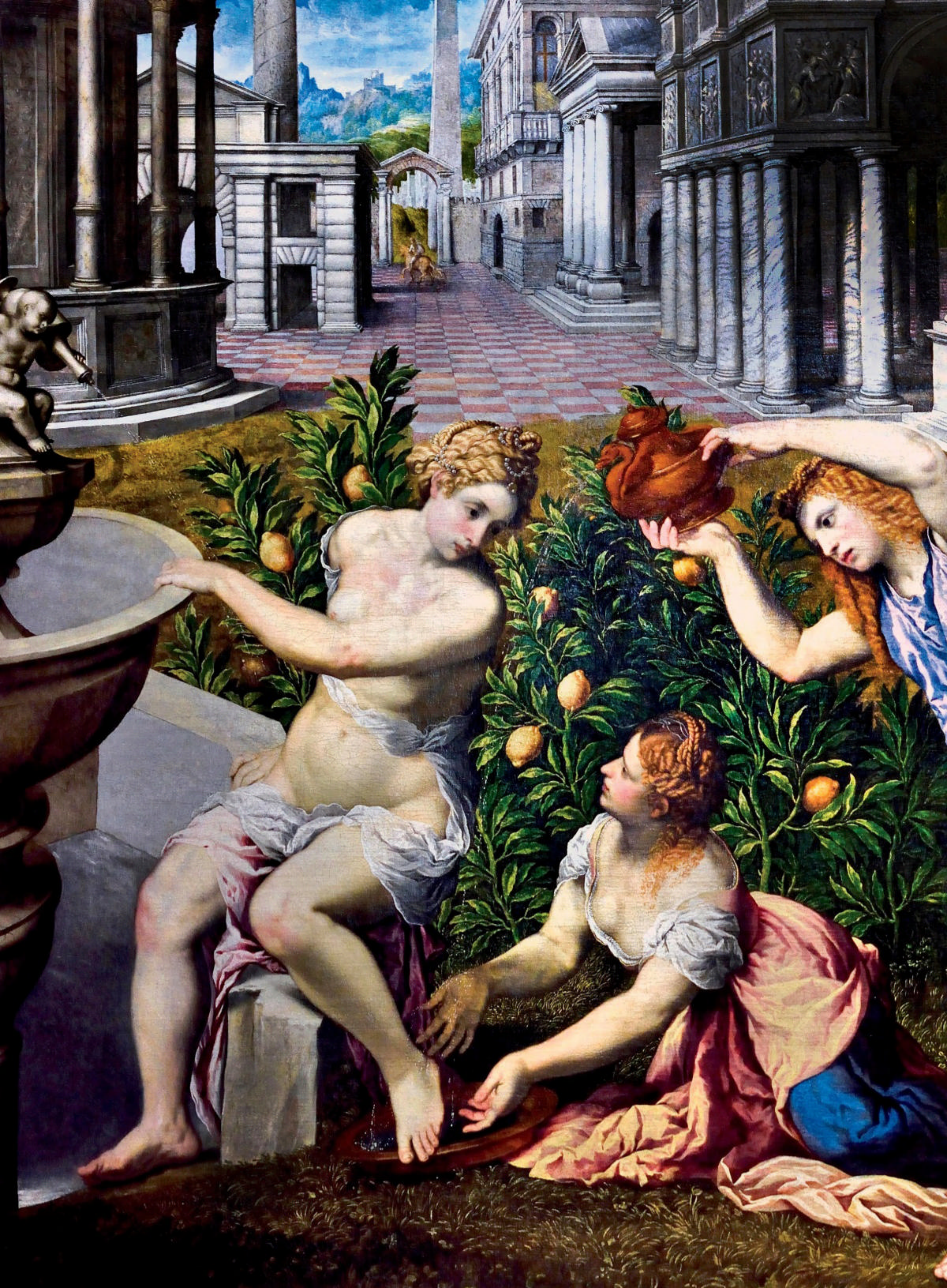
Immediately a hero to the people of Israel, David becomes the commander of Saul's forces, winning a series of battles that further establish his credentials as a military leader. This leads to Saul's all-consuming jealousy and his lengthy series of efforts to kill his younger rival. Twice David is given the opportunity to kill Saul, and both times

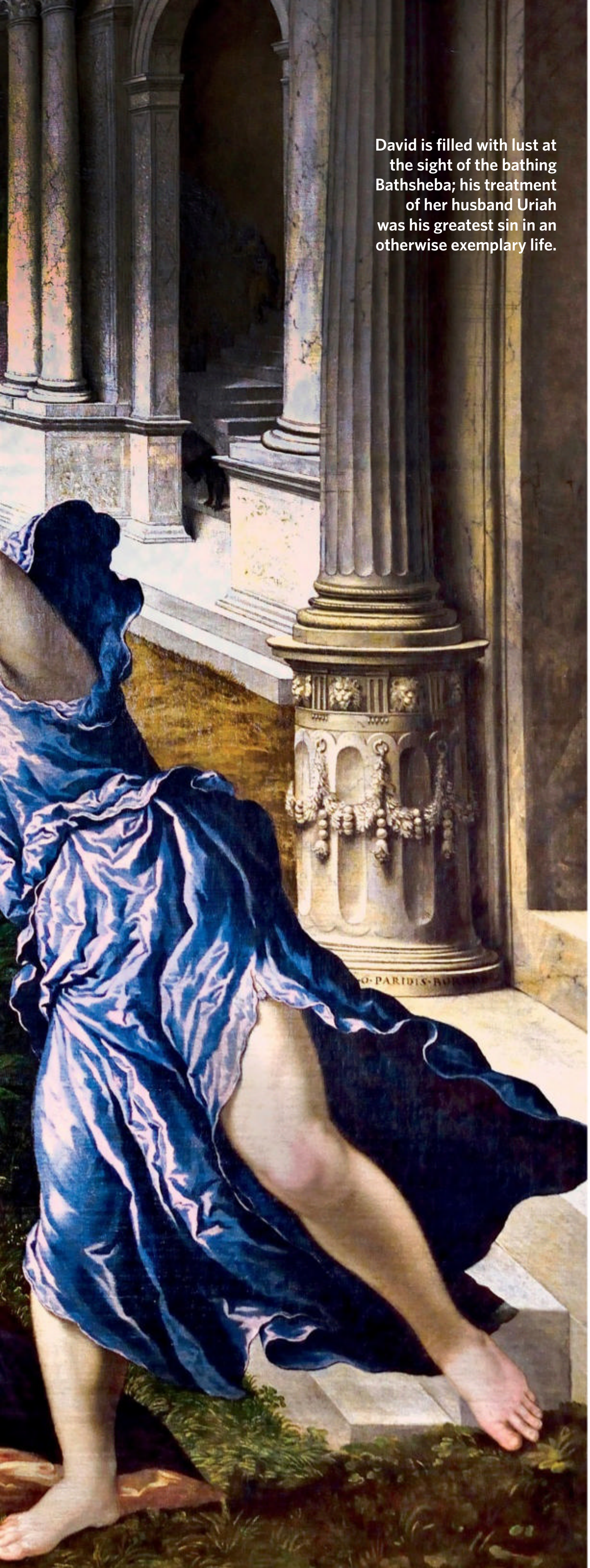


"But David said to the Philistine,
'You come to me with sword
and spear and javelin, but I come
to you in the name of the Lord
of hosts, the God of the armies of
Israel, whom you have defied.'"

1 SAMUEL 17:45

David's defeat of the giant Goliath was the first indication of his prowess as a military leader and of his special relationship with God.



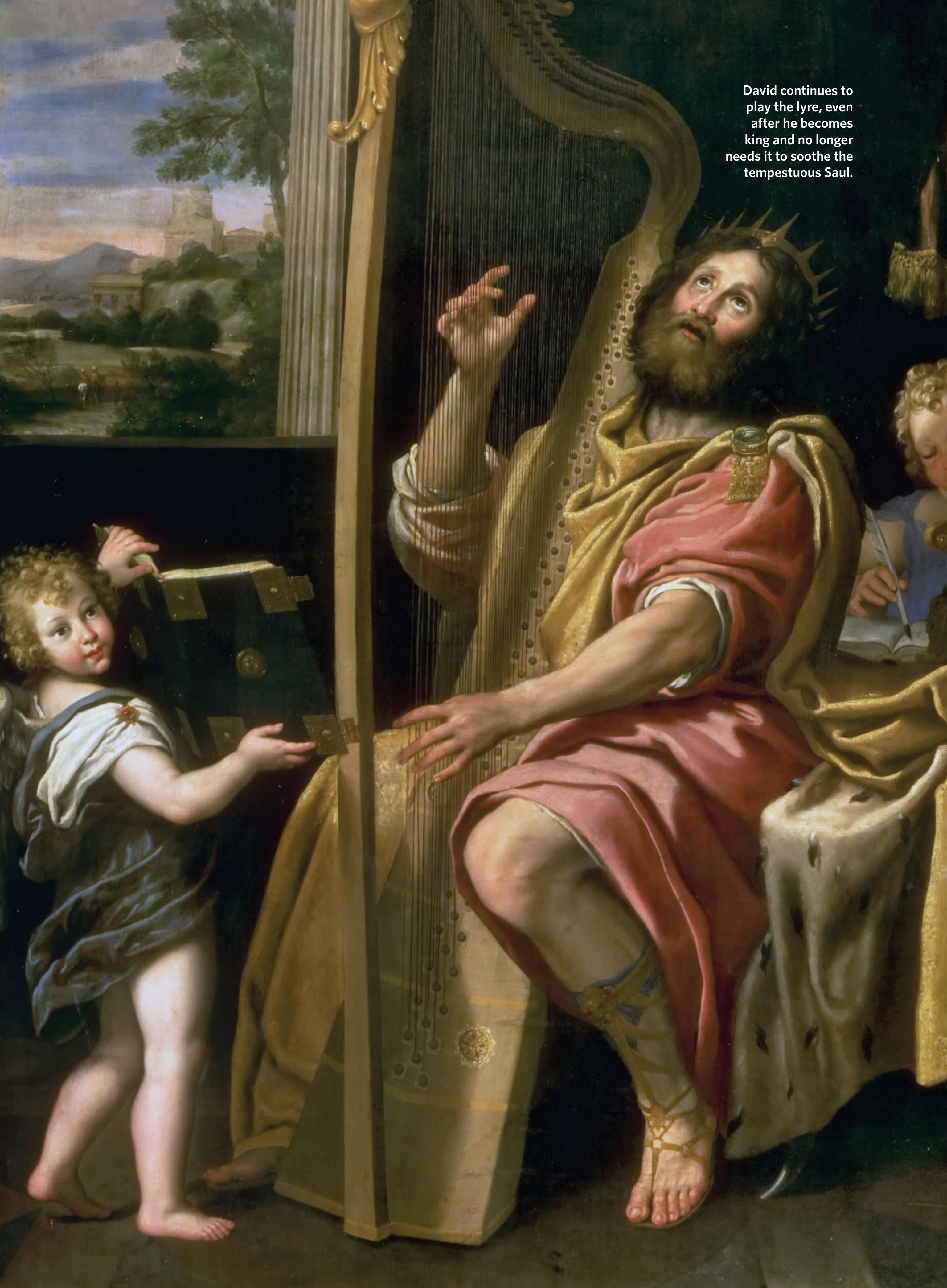


David is filled with lust at the sight of the bathing Bathsheba; his treatment of her husband Uriah was his greatest sin in an otherwise exemplary life.

> ***"He saw from the roof a woman bathing and she was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, 'This is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.'"***
>
> *2 SAMUEL 11:2–3*

David refuses to do so, proving yet again his moral superiority to the deeply flawed Saul. (This is a pattern throughout the saga of David; when killing needs to be done, it is always someone else who does it.) After Saul is killed in battle with the Philistines, David is immediately hailed as the king of Judah (southern Israel) but Saul's son Ishbaal assumes the throne of northern Israel. This time it is David's military commander Joab who does the dirty work, disposing of Ishbaal and enabling David to become king of all of Israel; eventually Joab kills Saul's loyal commander, Abner, as well, thereby eliminating the major threats to David's rule. David establishes his royal court in Jerusalem, ideally situated between Judah and northern Israel, and he installs the Ark of the Covenant in the city as a focal point for worship.

Up until this point, David has lived an exemplary life, giving all credit to God and winning victory after victory, even showing mercy for the defeated upon occasion. But this record is irrevocably marred by the story of his relationship with the beautiful Bathsheba, whom he spies one evening as she bathes on a rooftop below his own. Filled with desire, he orders his minions to bring her to him; then, despite her being married to Uriah, one of David's loyal soldiers, he asks her to "lie" with him. Bathsheba acquiesces, whether willingly or not we do not know, and the result is that she becomes pregnant with David's child. Hoping to cover his crime, David orders Uriah back from the fighting in hopes that he will sleep with his wife, thereby convincing the unsuspecting public that the child Bathsheba is carrying was conceived by Uriah. But Uriah refuses



David continues to play the lyre, even after he becomes king and no longer needs it to soothe the tempestuous Saul.

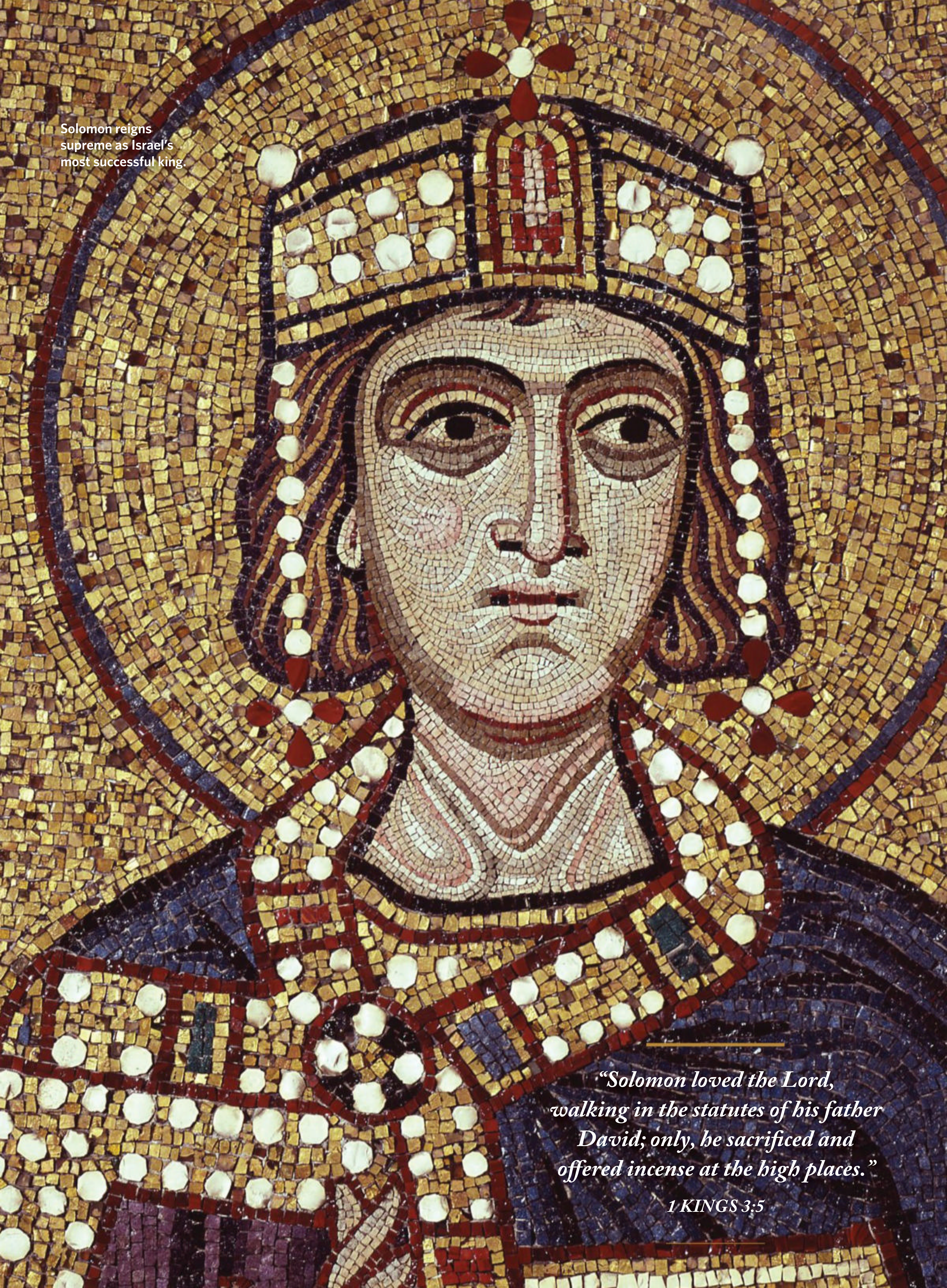
to take pleasure with his wife while his fellow soldiers are risking their lives at the front, so David orders Uriah back to the fighting and directs Uriah's commander to place him on the frontlines where he will be killed. Then, with Uriah out of the way, David marries Bathsheba.

The great prophet Nathan lambastes David for this transgression. "Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?" he asks David, further prophesying that the child born of this sinful act will not survive. Sure enough, the newborn child lives only seven days, despite David's fervent prayers that his son be spared.

God will accept David's humble and sincere request for forgiveness, but his punishment will extend beyond the death of his first child with Bathsheba. "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house," Nathan tells him, "for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord: 'I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house.'" Sure enough, one of David's sons, Amnon, rapes his half-sister Tamar, then compounds the horrific offense by banning her from her own home. Tamar's brother Absalom later murders Amnon for his treatment of Tamar, then flees from what he fears will be severe punishment from David. But David allows Absalom to return to Jerusalem, the only condition being that he is never to be in David's presence. Eventually the two are reconciled but Absalom, perhaps hurt by David's long-held intransigence, foments a rebellion against his father, gathering a mighty force to support him. David orders Joab to shut down the rebellion but not to hurt Absalom. Alas, poor Absalom. "Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on." When Joab is told of this odd circumstance, he wastes no time in ignoring David's instructions and having Absalom killed. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom!" David cries upon hearing the news. "Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son."

A newborn child lost, two sons murdered, a daughter raped—David's punishment for his sins was certainly substantial. But thankfully, he is left with one piece of good news: His second son with Bathsheba, Solomon by name, would inherit the throne of Israel after David's death.

David was immortalized in marble by the peerless Michelangelo.



Solomon reigns supreme as Israel's most successful king.

"Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places."

1 KINGS 3:5

Solomon

Wise Sovereign

Under the careful stewardship of this judicious king, Israel experiences a period of unusual stability.

The reign of Solomon represents the high-water mark in the story of God's relationship with the people of Israel. The nation is unified under a single, devout and faithful king; its borders stretch north and south farther than ever; and the land is exceptionally prosperous, with gold and wheat and gifts of every kind pouring in daily from the admiring nations surrounding it. After dispensing with his rivals early on—David designated Solomon as the next king, but there were other claimants to the throne—Solomon establishes a period of extended peace, as he undertakes several major, extremely lavish building projects, the most significant being the construction of a permanent temple and royal palace in Jerusalem. Solomon himself does not ask for any of these blessings; his only request of God is that he be granted "an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." God grants this petition. "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches…I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you." In the famous illustration of Solomon's wisdom, he is presented with two women, both of whom claim to be the mother of the same infant. How to choose the rightful parent? Solomon says he will split the child in half. One would-be mother seems satisfied that such a solution will prevent her rival from winning the contest, while the other begs Solomon to spare the child's life and grant custody to the other woman. Solomon of course gives the child to the woman willing to sacrifice her own claim in the interest of saving her child's life. Wise, indeed.

Alas, the tale of Solomon ends on a sour note as he strays from the rules of Israel's covenant with God, taking a series of non-Israelite wives and beginning to "follow" foreign gods. Rivals arise to challenge him, and God declares that He will remove His favor, allowing Israel to become divided once again. Was this final chapter in the Solomon saga written by a different author, as a means to explain the division and exile that will follow? We cannot know for sure, but the straying Solomon seems a far cry from the noble king of the earlier tales.

The Bible in the Movies

With greater and lesser success, Hollywood has brought many dramatic tales of Scripture to the silver screen.

A host of Hollywood movies have been based on the Bible. Some have hewed closely to the text, others have taken outrageous liberties in the interest of commercial success, but nothing can stop moviemakers from attempting to mine screen gold from the dramatic tales in the Good Book. Here is a roundup of the most notable adaptations:

Leading the pack is ***The Ten Commandments*** (1956), Cecil B. DeMille's epic retelling of the events from Exodus, starring the charismatic Charlton Heston as Moses, and a hammy Yul Brynner as Pharaoh. The scene depicting the parting of the Red Sea, created without any of today's sophisticated computer-generated imagery, is worth the price of admission alone.

Jesus' story has also been mined numerous times for the big screen. ***King of Kings*** (1961) was directed by Nicholas Ray and starred heartthrob Jeffrey Hunter as Jesus and Rip Torn as Judas.

Max von Sydow made his first appearance in an American film as Jesus in ***The Greatest Story Ever Told*** (1965), George Stevens' epic film about the life of Christ. The cast was star-studded to say the least, including Claude Rains (as King Herod), Telly Savalas (Pontius Pilate), Heston again (John the Baptist) and John Wayne as a Roman centurion who brings his unique cadence to the line: "Truly this man was the son of God." Sidney Poitier, Angela Lansbury and Shelley Winters all make brief appearances as well.

The gritty ***Gospel According to St. Matthew*** (1964), an Italian language film directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, remains a cult favorite among film students.

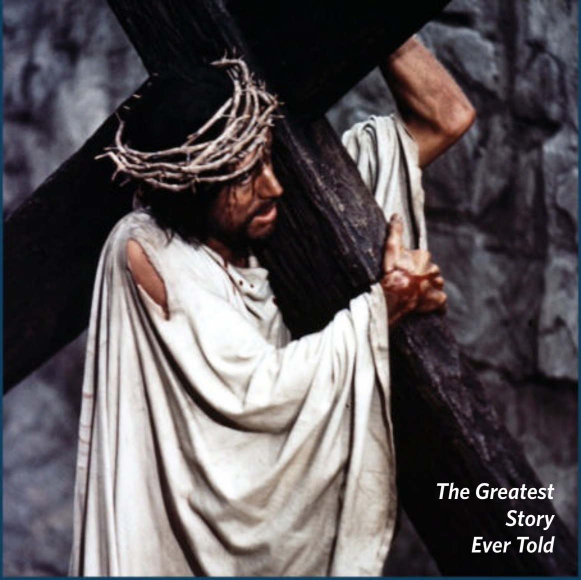
In 1977, acclaimed director Franco Zeffirelli attracted a massive television audience for ***Jesus of Nazareth***, a six-and-a-half-hour miniseries, starring the relatively unknown blue-eyed Robert Powell as Jesus, surrounded by an all-star cast, including Anne Bancroft, James Earl Jones, James Mason, Ernest Borgnine, Christopher Plummer, Laurence Olivier and Rod Steiger.

The Passion of the Christ (2004), directed by Mel Gibson and starring Jim Caviezel as Jesus, was a graphic depiction of the final hours of Jesus' life, from his anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane through to his Crucifixion and Resurrection.

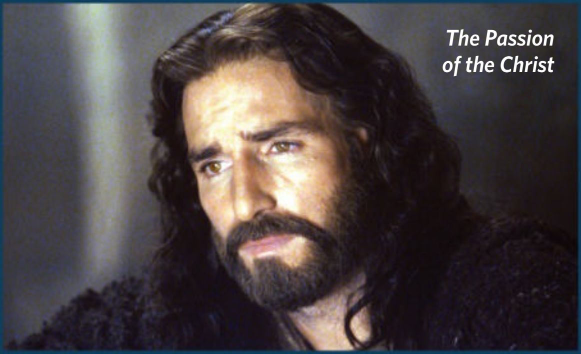
Some Bible-inspired movies are surprisingly steamy, like 1949's ***Samson and Delilah***. Another DeMille epic, it starred Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr as the Israelite strongman and his treacherous lover. Another was ***David and Bathsheba*** (1951). The adulterous couple is played by Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, while Raymond Massey (known for his many portrayals of Abraham Lincoln) brought gravitas to the role of the prophet Nathan.

Fewer films have taken on the events from the Book of Genesis, but ***The Bible: In the***

Samson and Delilah



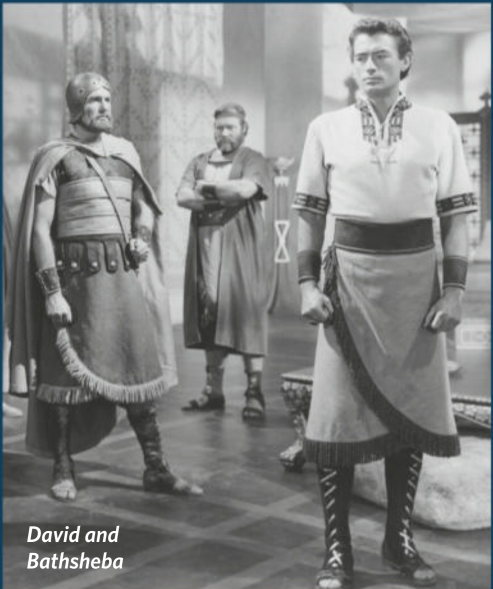
The Greatest Story Ever Told



The Passion of the Christ

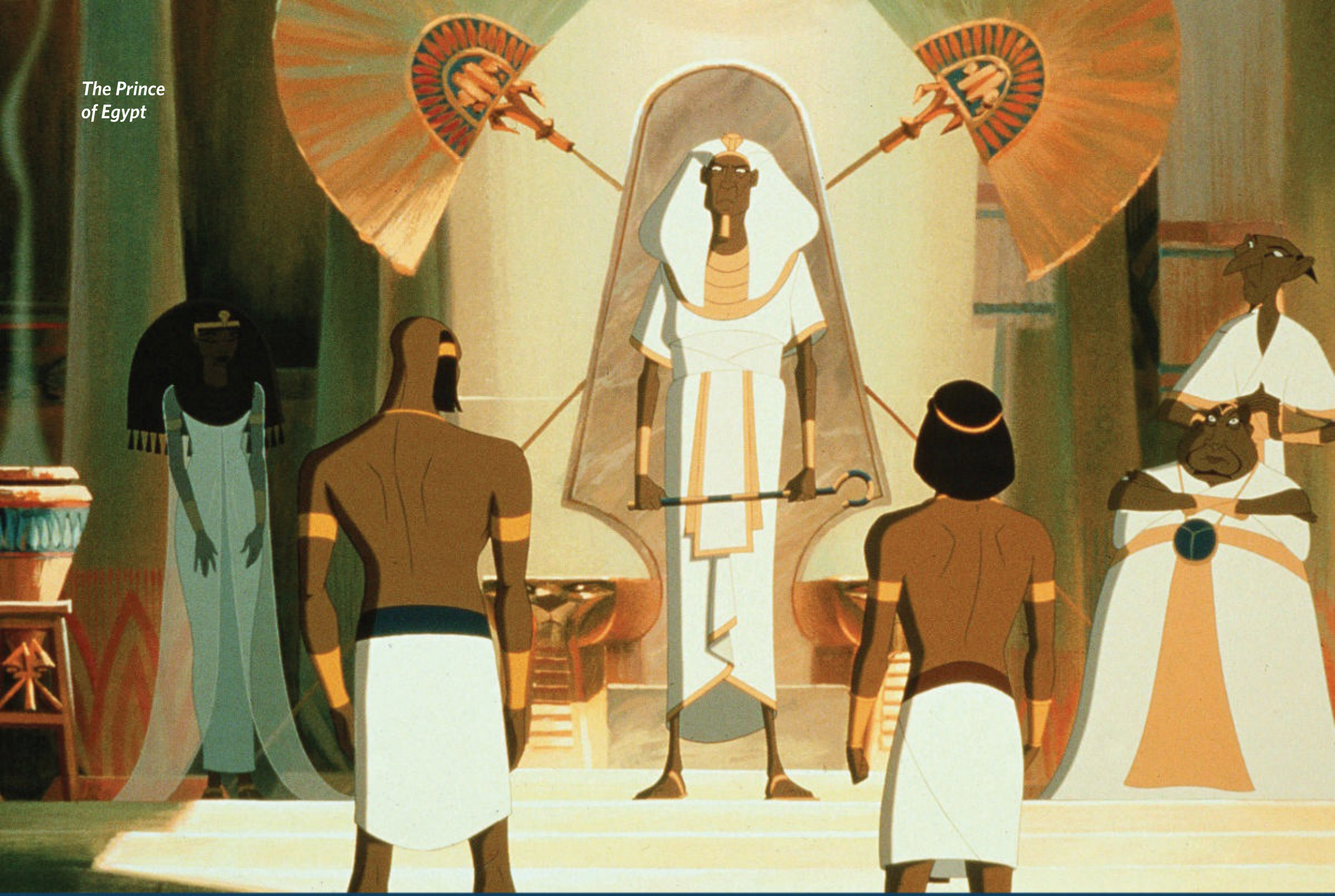
King of Kings

The Ten Commandments



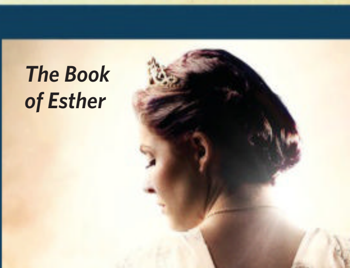
David and Bathsheba

The Bible: In the Beginning

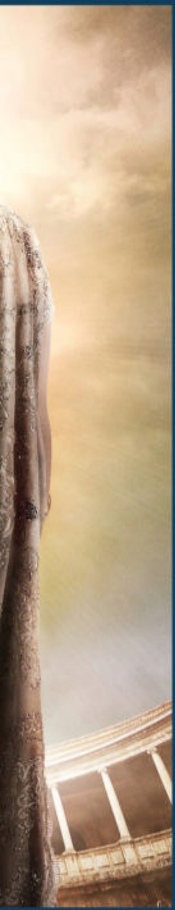


The Prince of Egypt

Noah

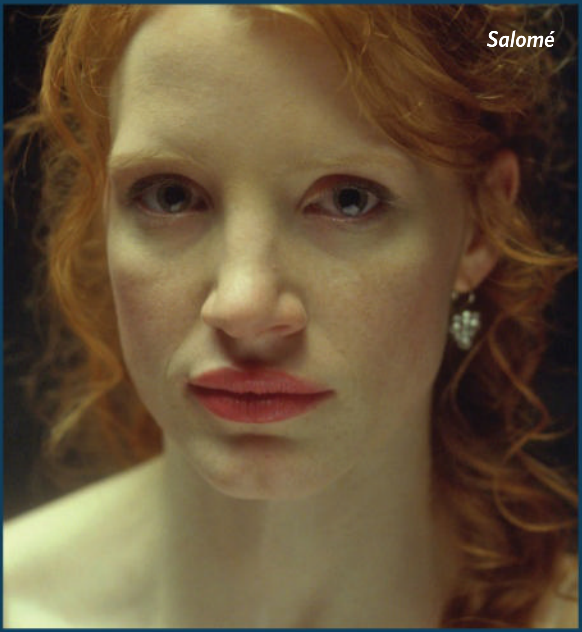


The Book of Esther



Mary Magdalene

Exodus: Gods and Kings

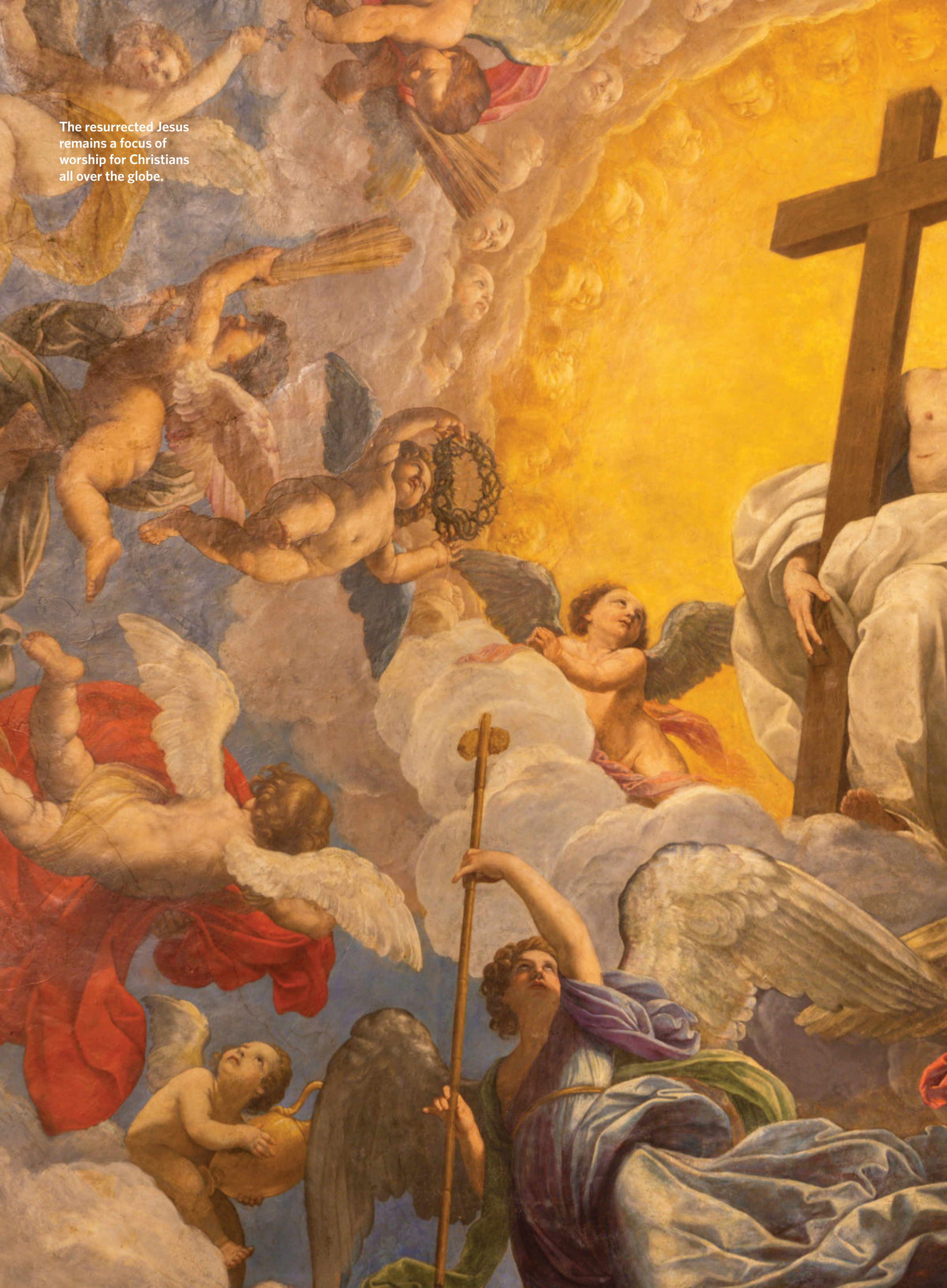


Salomé

Beginning (1966) took a shot at it, covering events from creation to the near-sacrifice of Isaac. It starred Michael Parks as Adam, Ulla Bergryd as Eve, John Huston (who also directed) as Noah, George C. Scott as Abraham and Ava Gardner as Sarah.

Animation powerhouse DreamWorks went biblical with ***The Prince of Egypt*** (1998). This animated retelling of the life of Moses, hand-drawn and authenticated with the help of some 600 religious scholars, earned $218.6 million worldwide. Actors providing the voices for the film included Val Kilmer, Michelle Pfeiffer, Martin Short, Ralph Fiennes and Steve Martin.

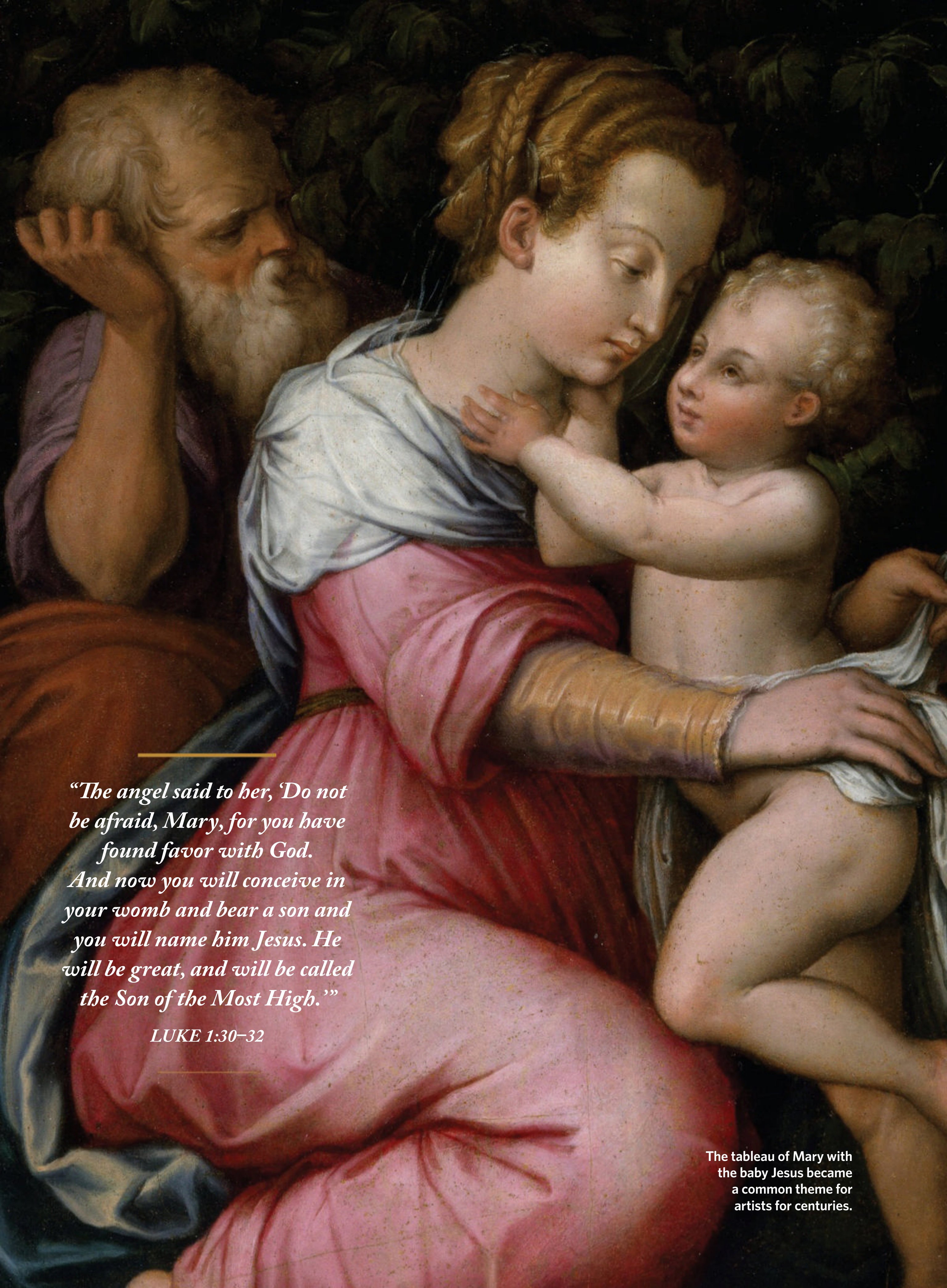
More recent performances are Russell Crowe as the title character in ***Noah*** (2014); Christian Bale as Moses in ***Exodus: Gods and Kings*** (2014); Jen Lilley as the Persian queen in ***The Book of Esther*** (2013); Jessica Chastain and Al Pacino in ***Salomé*** (2013); and Rooney Mara as Jesus' follower ***Mary Magdalene*** (2018). Stay tuned—plenty more are sure to come in the years ahead.



The resurrected Jesus remains a focus of worship for Christians all over the globe.

New Testament Founders of the Faith

Unshakable belief in Jesus as Christ and Savior is the unifying theme of these seminal figures.



"The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.'"

LUKE 1:30–32

The tableau of Mary with the baby Jesus became a common theme for artists for centuries.

Mary

The Virgin Mother

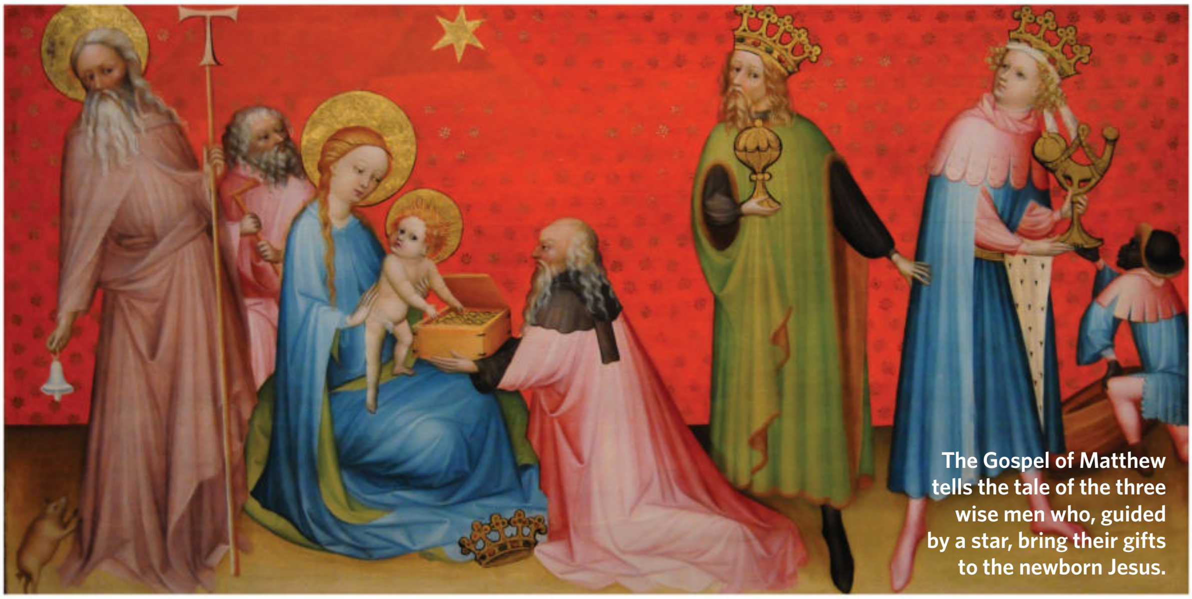
The quiet, steadfast faith of Mary, the mother of Jesus, has inspired Christians ever since that first blessed Christmas.

No woman in history is more venerated in the Christian tradition than Mary, mother of Jesus, Lord and Savior. Her image can be found in sculpture, in stained glass and in iconic paintings that grace the walls of churches, cathedrals and museums all over the world. Prayers are addressed directly to her in the Catholic and Orthodox liturgies by millions of believers who regularly turn to her for help when faced with troubled circumstances. Her central role in the story of Jesus will forever make her a figure of honor.

As with so many elements in the biography of Jesus, the story of his mother is filled with unlikely circumstances that seem to turn the expectations of the world upside down. Mary is a poor young woman, hardly someone of wealth or status, but it is to her to whom the angel Gabriel appears, declaring, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." What could this small-town girl from the Galilean town of Nazareth, probably still in her teens, have felt when confronted with this heavenly messenger? The Bible tells us that she is "perplexed," but she must have experienced at least a little fear as well. Gabriel offers her words of reassurance: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And, now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary's next question to the angel is entirely understandable. Just how is she going to conceive and bear a son if she is still a virgin? This leads to another shocking proclamation from Gabriel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

Mary's response to this astonishing series of angelic declarations remains one of history's most memorable declarations of faith. "Here am I," she says, "the servant of the Lord. Let it be according to your word." She expresses no objection, no concern about being a pregnant, unmarried young woman in a society most assuredly unsympathetic to that condition; she simply accepts the will of God as it has been delivered to her. The Gospel of Matthew tells of another angelic visit, this one to Joseph, who had been planning to send Mary away quietly—a merciful approach under the circumstances—but the angel brings him some truly astonishing news. The child in Mary's womb, the angel tells him, is "from the Holy Spirit" and will "save his people



The Gospel of Matthew tells the tale of the three wise men who, guided by a star, bring their gifts to the newborn Jesus.

from their sins." In his own remarkable act of faith, Joseph immediately changes course and embraces his marriage and Mary as his wife.

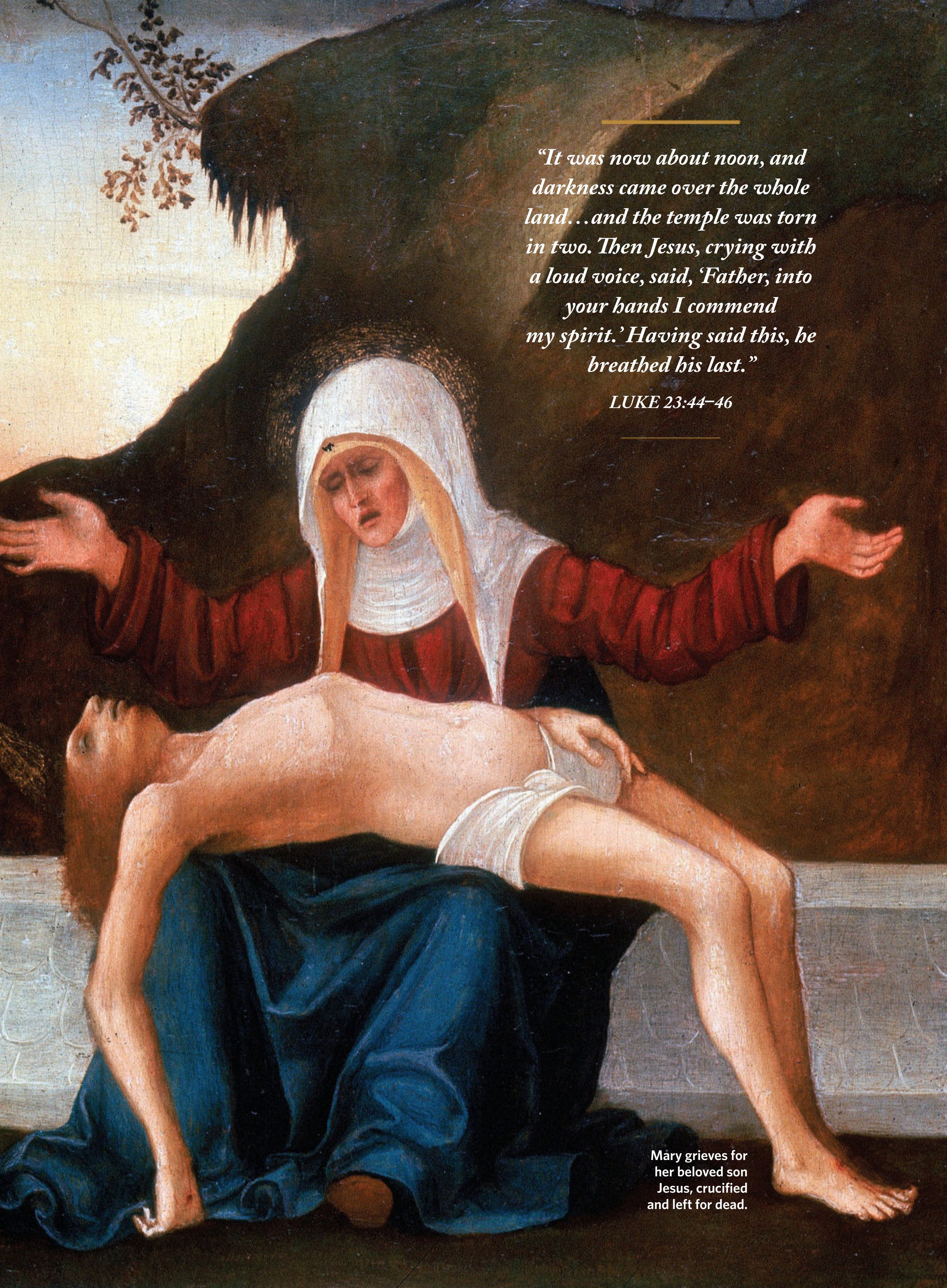
Soon thereafter, the Bible recounts the familiar but nonetheless astonishing tales of Christmas. As Mary and Joseph approach the village of Bethlehem to be counted in the Roman census, Mary's time to deliver her child becomes imminent. All the lodgings in the town are occupied, so the couple—soon to become parents to the Savior of the world!—is forced to beg for space in a lowly stable. There Mary gives birth, surrounded presumably by the animals that would be present in such a space—the Bible does not say, but the embellishments of the story in the centuries since have added some combination of cows, sheep, donkeys, perhaps even goats, to the tableau. With no cradle on hand, Mary is forced to use a manger, a rough-hewn container normally used to feed livestock, as a place to nestle her newborn son. Are any of these details what one might expect would surround the coming of the Son of God? Surely not, but they are of a piece with the man the babe will become, who will reject the conventions of the world at every turn.

After recounting the holy birth, Luke tells us of the shepherds "keeping watch over their flocks by night" and of another terrifying angelic appearance to them, and of their visit to the babe, and of their report to Mary about their visitation and the glad tidings told them by the angel. The new mother's response to all the hoopla is just what we have come to expect: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Thoughtful, faithful Mary.

Matthew tells us of the three wise men sent by Herod to find the child "born king of the Jews" and of their use of a star whose brilliant light guides them to Jesus, and of the gifts they bring, and of their decision to avoid returning to Herod to protect the child from harm. Yet another line of miracles surrounding the holy babe.

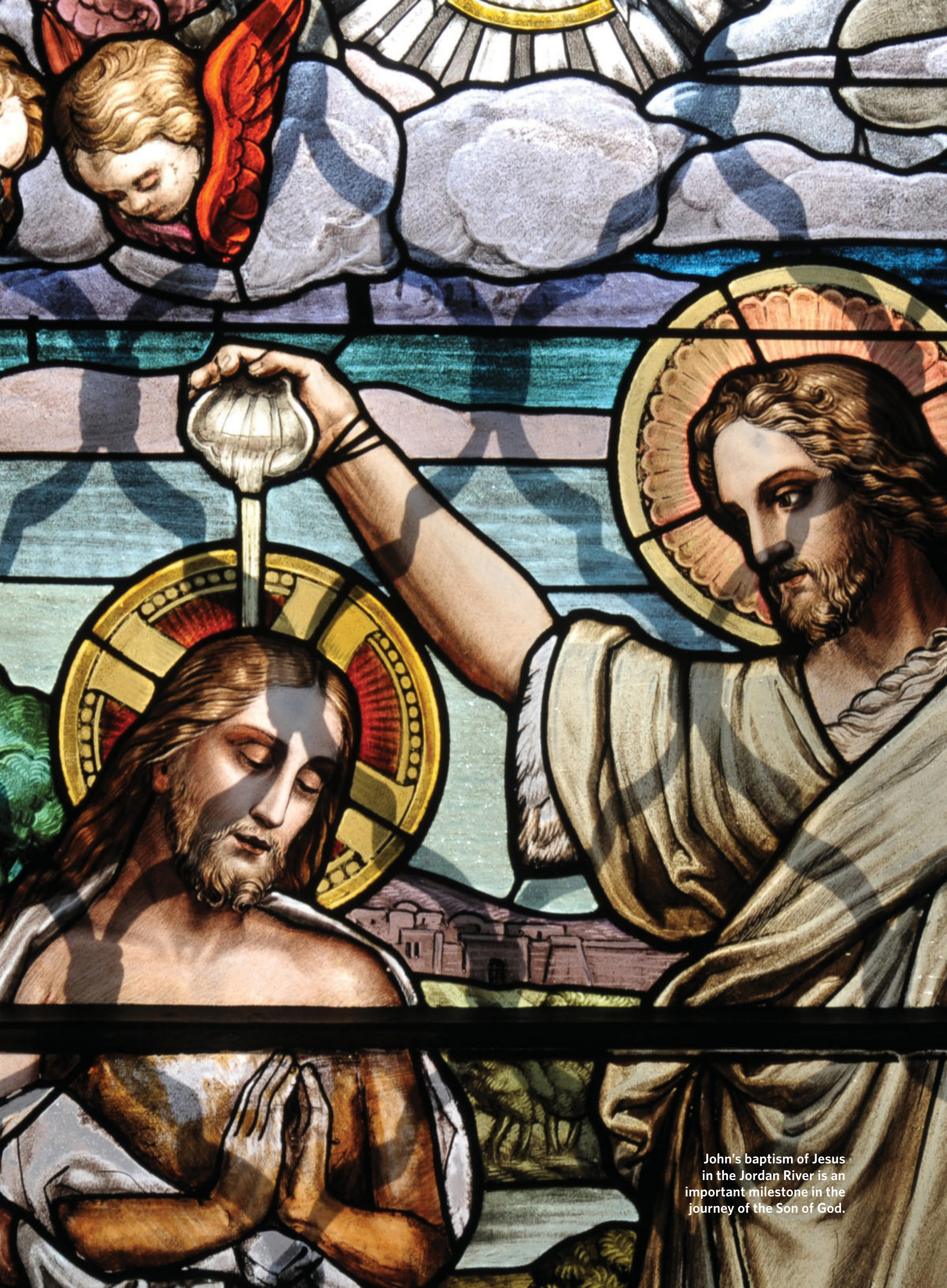
Mary steps into the background of the story after this, but not entirely. She is there when Jesus gets lost as a boy in bustling Jerusalem and his parents find him in the temple, discussing the meaning of Scripture with far more senior teachers of the faith. "All who heard him were amazed at his understanding," the Bible tells us. Later, according to the Gospel of John, Mary is present at the agonizing moment when her son is crucified: "Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

There is one final, brief reference to Mary in the Book of Acts, where she is described as one of the founders of the early Christian church. And so, almost unique among women in the Bible, we see Mary from her youth, through her motherhood and on to her full maturity as one of the senior leaders of the emerging Christian community.



> *“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land…and the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.”*
>
> *LUKE 23:44–46*

Mary grieves for her beloved son Jesus, crucified and left for dead.



John's baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River is an important milestone in the journey of the Son of God.

John the Baptist

Precursor of Christ

The great forerunner of Jesus, he pays the ultimate price for his faith, becoming the first in a long line of martyrs.

The birth of John the Baptist, though not as miraculous as the advent of Jesus, is nonetheless a wondrous event. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, are both well advanced in years and have long ago given up any hope of having a child. But the angel Gabriel appears to a shocked and terrified Zechariah and tells him that Elizabeth will conceive and give birth to a son. "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." Zechariah expresses disbelief, a skepticism for which he is struck dumb until the birth of his son, who will become the great forerunner of Jesus known as John the Baptist.

The powerful connection between John and Jesus begins for both of them in the womb. When Elizabeth is visited by her pregnant cousin Mary, soon to give birth to Jesus, the child in Mary's womb jumps for joy. "Blessed are you among women," Elizabeth cries, "and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

Soon, John is preaching throughout Israel, baptizing large crowds of believers in the Jordan River and declaring, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Jesus himself comes to John to be baptized, whereupon, the Gospel of Mark reports, Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.'"

Later, Mark describes the sad tale of John's death. He is arrested for his open criticism of King Herod Antipas, who has taken his brother's wife, Herodias, as his own, an act condemned by John as contrary to God's law. Herodias' daughter, identified by the historian Josephus as Salomé, dances for Herod and his cronies. Her performance is so pleasing that Herod promises to fulfill whatever request she might make of him. Salomé asks her mother what she should request; Herodias instructs her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Reluctantly, according to Mark—not so much so, according to Matthew—Herod agrees to the request. John is then beheaded and Salomé is presented with his head on a platter. Matthew reports that the disciples "came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus," who "withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place."

Peter

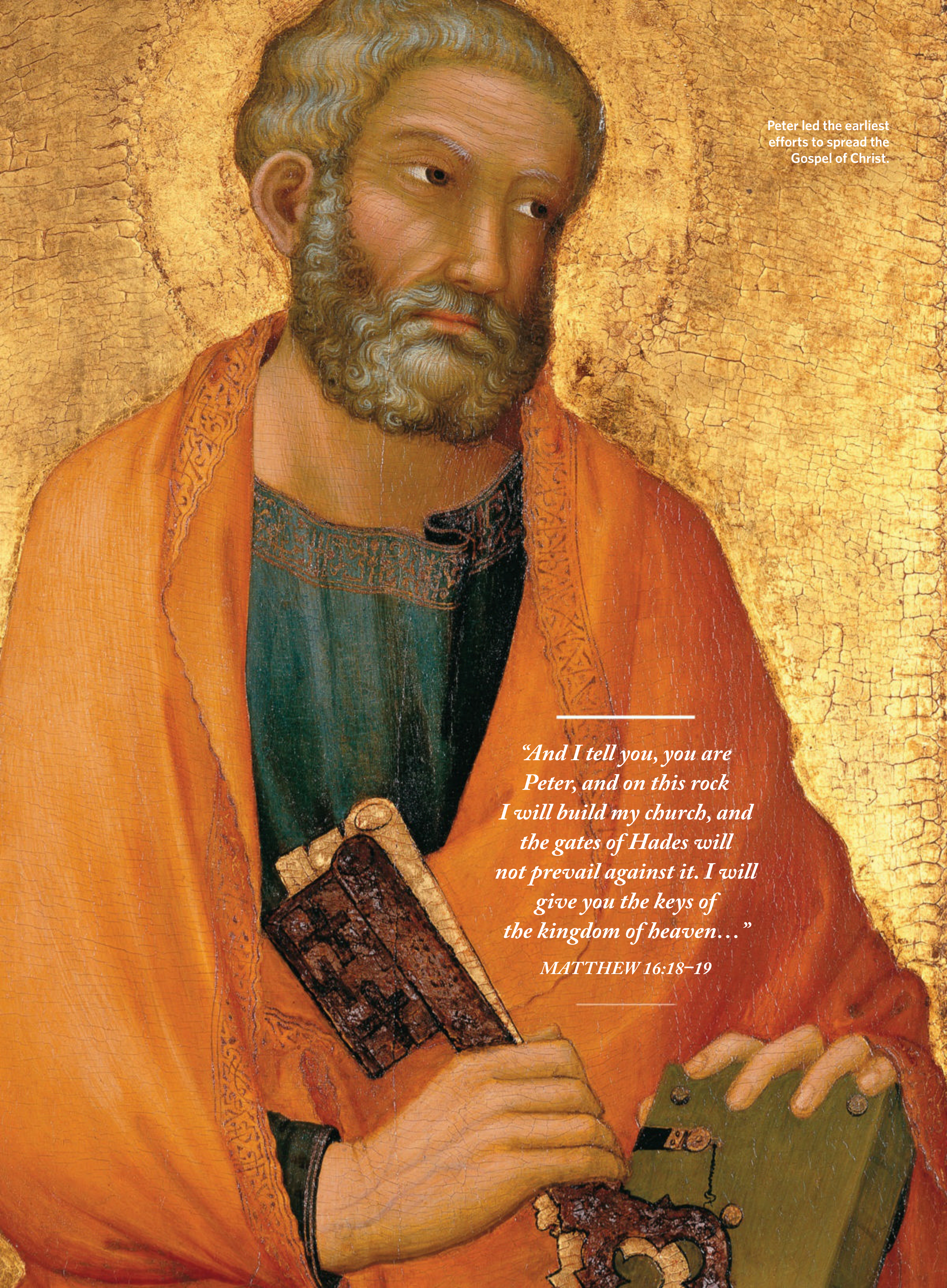
Rock of the Faith

Despite his cowardice in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion, he goes on to become the very cornerstone on which the Christian church is built.

The disciples of Jesus are frequently depicted in the scriptures as being highly fallible human beings. They often fail to understand Jesus' message, requiring him to spell out precisely what his parables really mean. They bicker among themselves, too, most famously in an argument about which disciple will be granted the favor of the right-hand position next to Jesus on his heavenly throne. In this sense, they stand in for the mass of humanity, full of the same petty jealousies and stubborn misunderstandings that plague us all.

Peter and his brother Andrew are the first disciples to join Jesus, after he finds them casting their nets into the Sea of Galilee. "Follow me," he tells them, "and I will make you fish for people." "Immediately," the Gospel of Matthew reports, "they left their nets and followed him," a striking testament to the spiritual power so evident to all who encountered Jesus. Luke's version of Peter's call is more dramatic. After a large crowd has gathered on the shore, Jesus gets into Peter's boat and asks him to "put out a little way from the shore." (Peter is called Simon at this point; Jesus will later give him the name "Peter" from the Greek word for rock—"You are Peter," Jesus tells him, "and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." This foundational role is why Roman Catholics consider Peter to be the original pope.) Then Jesus tells Peter to cast his nets into the sea, and, despite a disappointing catch thus far, the fishermen pull up an enormous quantity of fish, so many that they are required to call for a second boat to hold the astonishing bounty. Luke concludes the story: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

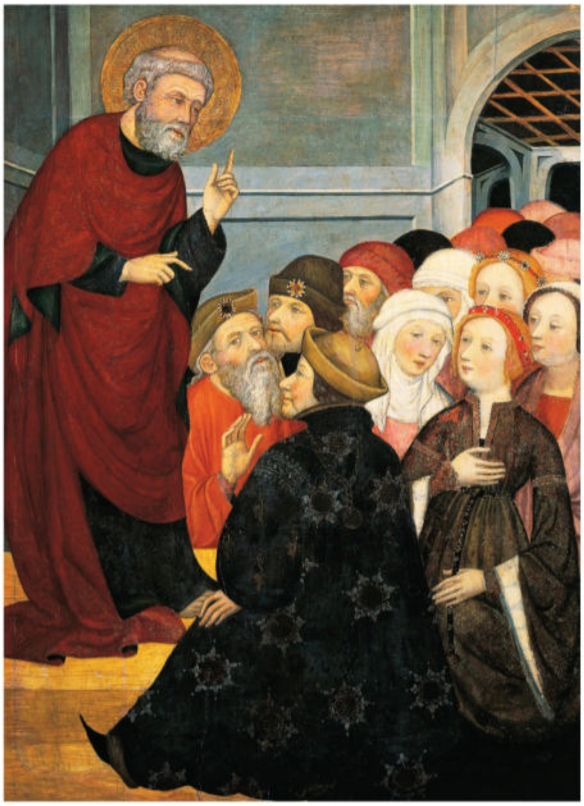
Throughout the Gospel narratives, the disciples display a seemingly incomprehensible lack of faith, even after witnessing the astonishing miracles Jesus performs repeatedly. When a storm threatens the small boat in which they are traveling, they are terrified until they wake the sleeping Jesus, who quickly calms the waters, then chides them: "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Later, just before Jesus' Crucifixion, it is Peter whose faithlessness is most dramatic. Jesus had told Peter that, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times," and just as predicted, when confronted by multiple bystanders who claim to have seen Peter with Jesus, he denies their claims, with greater vehemence each time. After the third denial, the cock crows, filling Peter with shame. "Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said.... And he went out and wept bitterly."



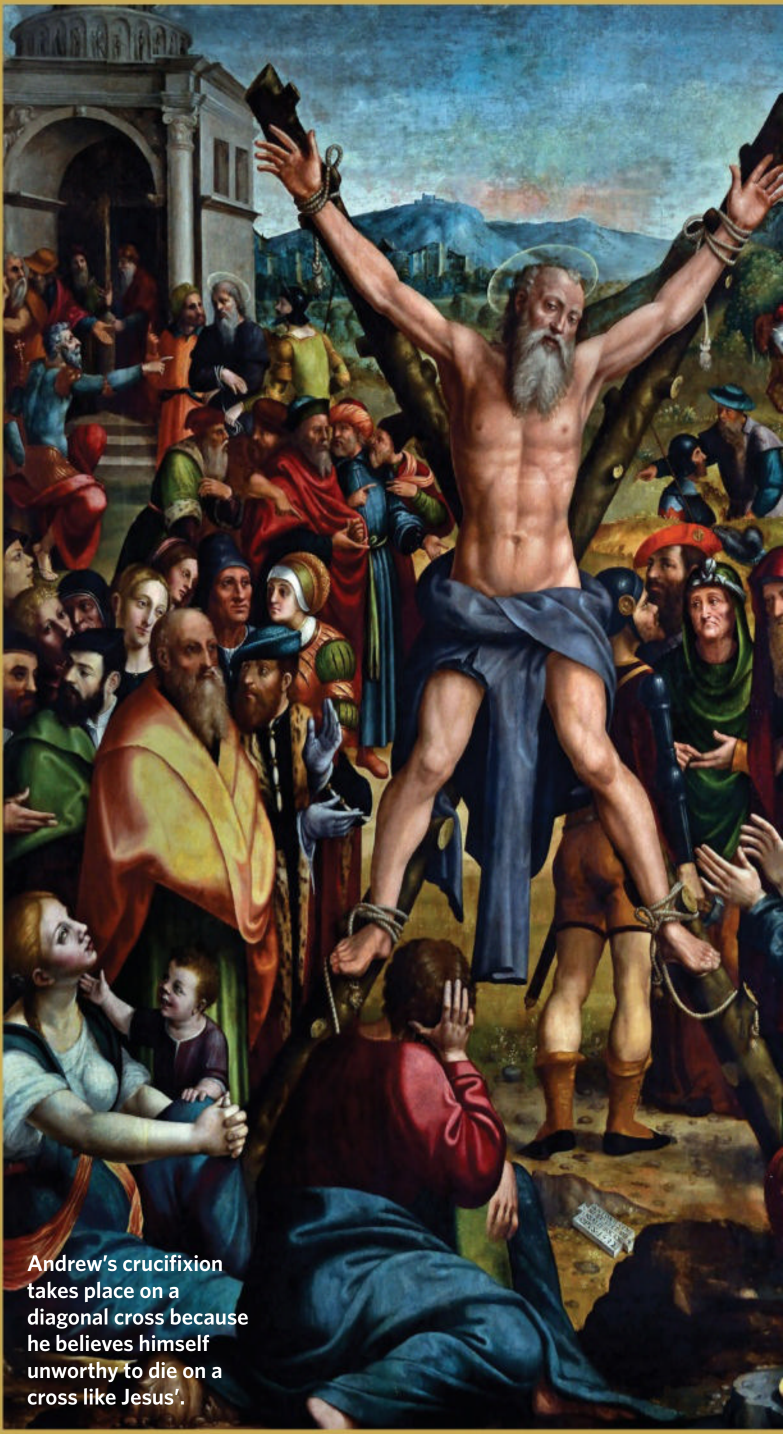
Peter led the earliest efforts to spread the Gospel of Christ.

> *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven…"*
>
> *MATTHEW 16:18–19*

Despite this betrayal, Peter is the one who runs to the tomb and confirms the tale reported to him by Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, among others, who tell the disciples the tomb is empty after the resurrection. And it is Peter who becomes the leader of the earliest church. He is the first to preach at Pentecost, the event that sees the Holy Spirit descend on the apostles and motivate them to begin the work of spreading Jesus' message; eventually Peter travels to Samaria and Caesarea, where he converts the first Gentiles to the faith, agreeing to baptize them without requiring them to be circumcised, a decision that was likely controversial. He is later imprisoned in Rome by Herod, but the night before he is presumably to be executed, an angel appears to him in his cell and "the chains fell off his wrists." The angel tells him to get up and follow the angel, who leads him past the guards, out of the prison and past the city gate, which "opened for them of its own accord." When he returns to his fellow believers gathered in the home of Mary, mother of John, they weep with jubilation. Peter disappears from the biblical narrative after that point, but by then his place as the cornerstone of the Christian church is fully established.



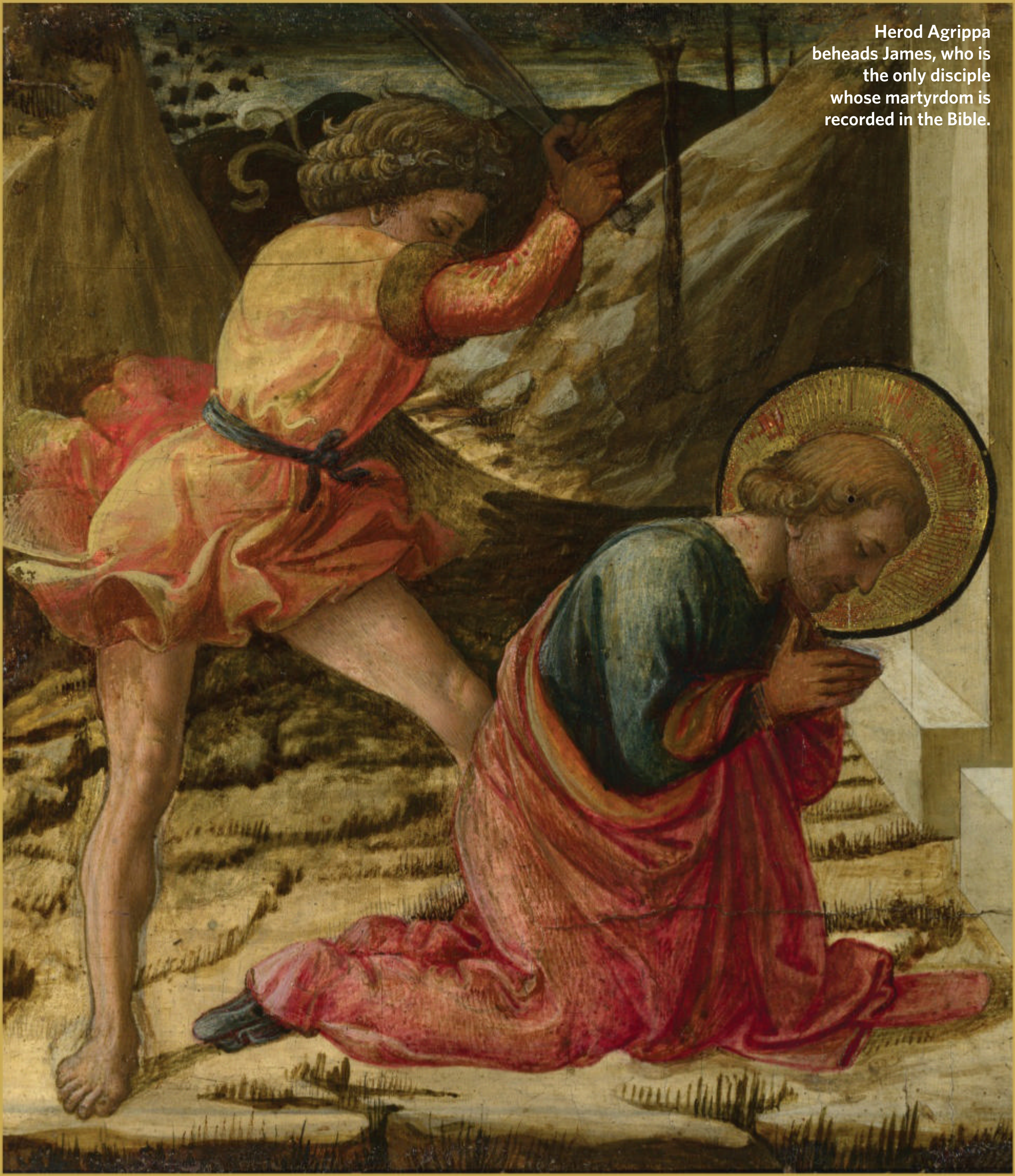
"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ," Peter tells the Jewish community.



Andrew's crucifixion takes place on a diagonal cross because he believes himself unworthy to die on a cross like Jesus'.

The Other Disciples

Many of the disciples are simply names in the biblical text, with little or no biographical detail attached to them. Philip, Bartholomew, Jude, James, son of Alphaeus, and Simon all fall into this category, as does Matthew, though we do know that he was a tax collector before being called. The rest hold more prominent, though hardly extensive,



Herod Agrippa beheads James, who is the only disciple whose martyrdom is recorded in the Bible.

places in the story. Andrew, brother of Peter, is often considered the first disciple, though the text suggests he was called simultaneously with Peter. According to the Gospel of John, he was a follower of John the Baptist before becoming one of Jesus' disciples. James and John, sons of Zebedee, were also among the first four disciples called. (John may or may not be the "disciple whom Jesus loved" and the author of the Gospel of John; scholars have their doubts about that attribution.) Peter, James and John seem to have been part of an inner circle who witness Jesus' raising of the daughter of Jairus and his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and are present at the Transfiguration, when Jesus ascends a mountain and "was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light." James is the only disciple whose martyrdom is recorded in the Bible; he is beheaded by Herod Agrippa. John's later role in the growth of the early church is more certain; he travels with Peter to Samaria, among other journeys on behalf of the new faith. Thomas is largely known as the disciple who doubts the truth of the Resurrection—hence the epithet "Doubting Thomas"—until Jesus appears and allows him to touch his wounds, whereupon Thomas declares: "My Lord and my God!"

Mary Magdalene

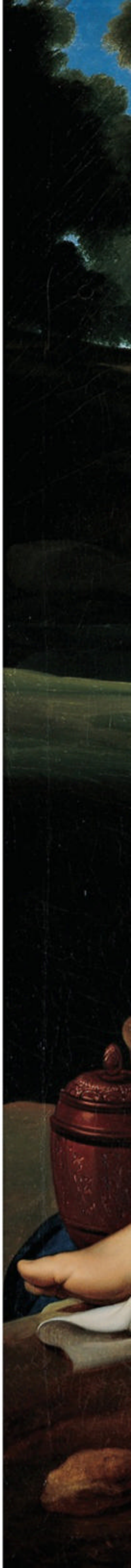
Steadfast Follower

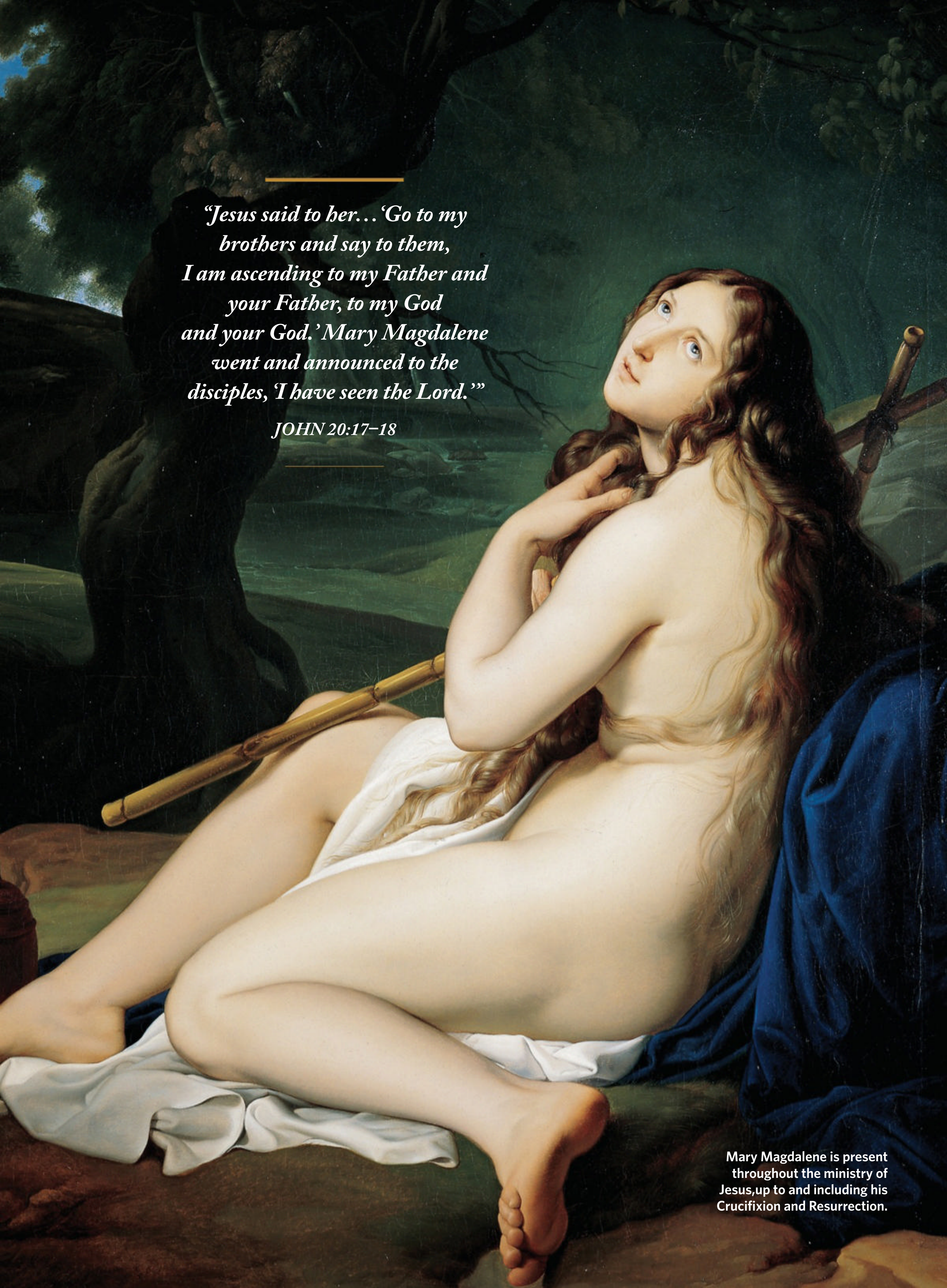
More faithful than the most devout disciples, she is among the very first to witness the risen Christ.

There are a host of misconceptions about Mary Magdalene. The most enduring is the idea that she was a reformed prostitute, but others have proliferated more recently, including the notion that she was the bride at the wedding in Cana where Jesus turned water into wine, or that she and Jesus were romantic and perhaps sexual lovers. In the popular musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, she is romantically smitten with Jesus, pouring out her longing in the production's most memorable song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." None of these fanciful ideas have any basis in the Bible. What she was, very clearly in the Gospel accounts, was Jesus' most loyal follower, who remained with him right to the end, even after many of his male disciples had deserted him.

She is first presented as one among a surprisingly large group of women who had been "cured of evil spirits and infirmities" and were traveling with Jesus and his disciples, providing for them "out of their resources." The Bible tells us that the group included "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out." The number of demons suggests that Mary suffered from a serious illness; it does not in any sense suggest sexual promiscuity. The prominence of these women and their traveling together with men—extremely unusual for the time—in their support of Jesus' ministry was just one indication of how highly Jesus viewed women; a host of other anecdotes attest to his bestowing equal, and sometimes superior, status on women as opposed to their frequently feckless male counterparts.

Later, when Jesus is condemned to death, Mary Magdalene is there again, watching and no doubt weeping as her Lord and Savior is nailed to the cross. Finally, it is Mary Magdalene alone, or along with two other women—the details are a little different in each Gospel—who goes to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body with ointments and spices. As they are walking, the women are wondering how they will be able to reach the body, since they had seen an enormous stone placed in front of it to block the entrance. But when they reach the tomb, they find that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. In John's account, Mary Magdalene visits the tomb alone and runs back to bring Peter and "the disciple Jesus loved"—often identified as the disciple John—to witness this miraculous event. Peter and John follow her to the tomb, confirm her findings, and rush back to tell the rest of the disciples. Mary remains behind, weeping. When she looks into the tomb, she sees "two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying." She asks them where Jesus has been taken. Before she receives an answer, she turns around and suddenly sees a man standing there; at first, she mistakes him for the gardener, and asks him, too, whether he knows the location of Jesus' body. "Mary!" he says to her. And in that moment she recognizes him as Jesus and cries out in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" or Teacher. And so it came to pass that Mary Magdalene, faithful and strong, became the first person to see the risen Lord and the first to report his Resurrection to the world.





> *"Jesus said to her…'Go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.'"*
>
> *JOHN 20:17–18*

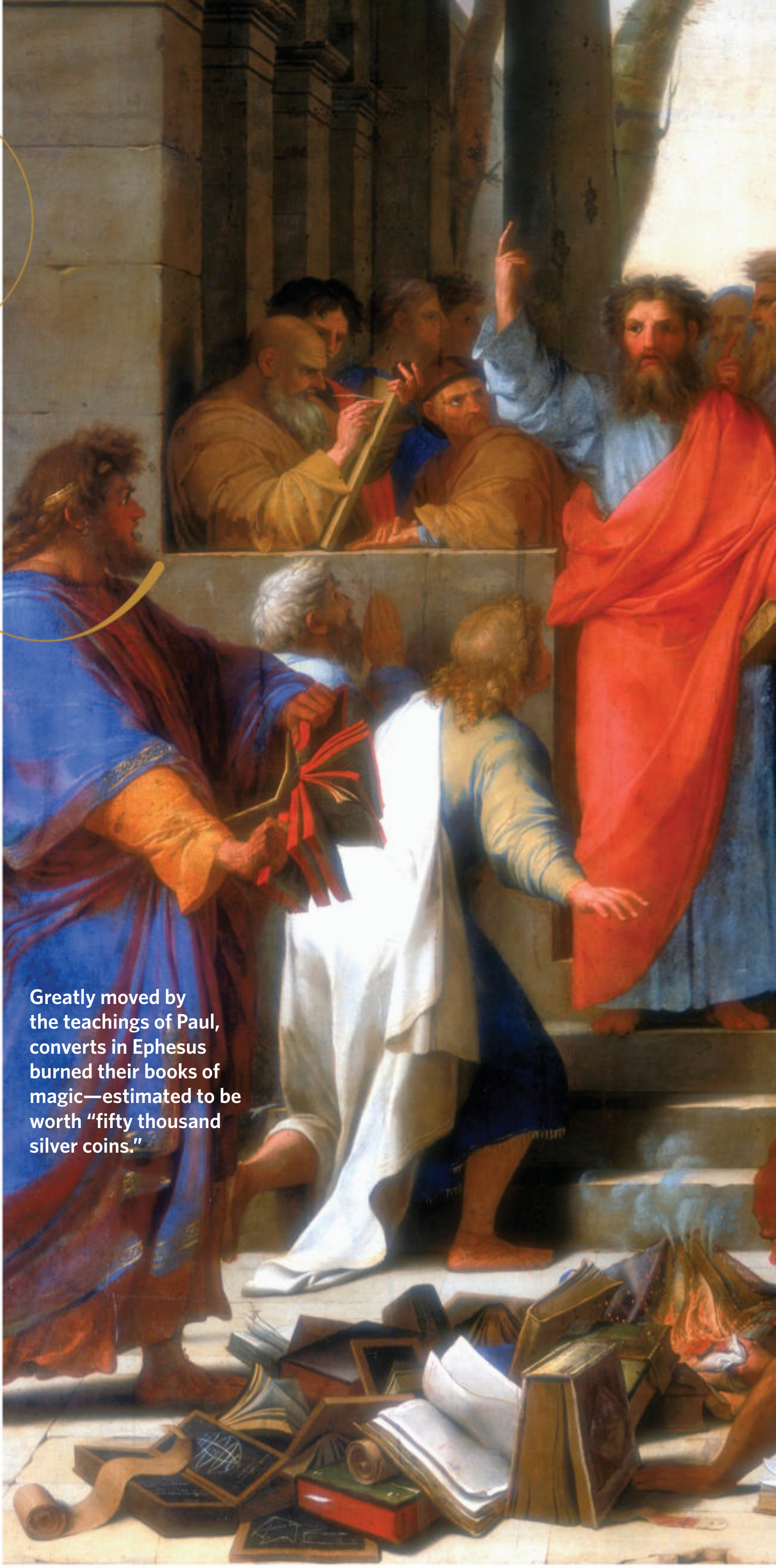
Mary Magdalene is present throughout the ministry of Jesus,up to and including his Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Paul

The First Theologian

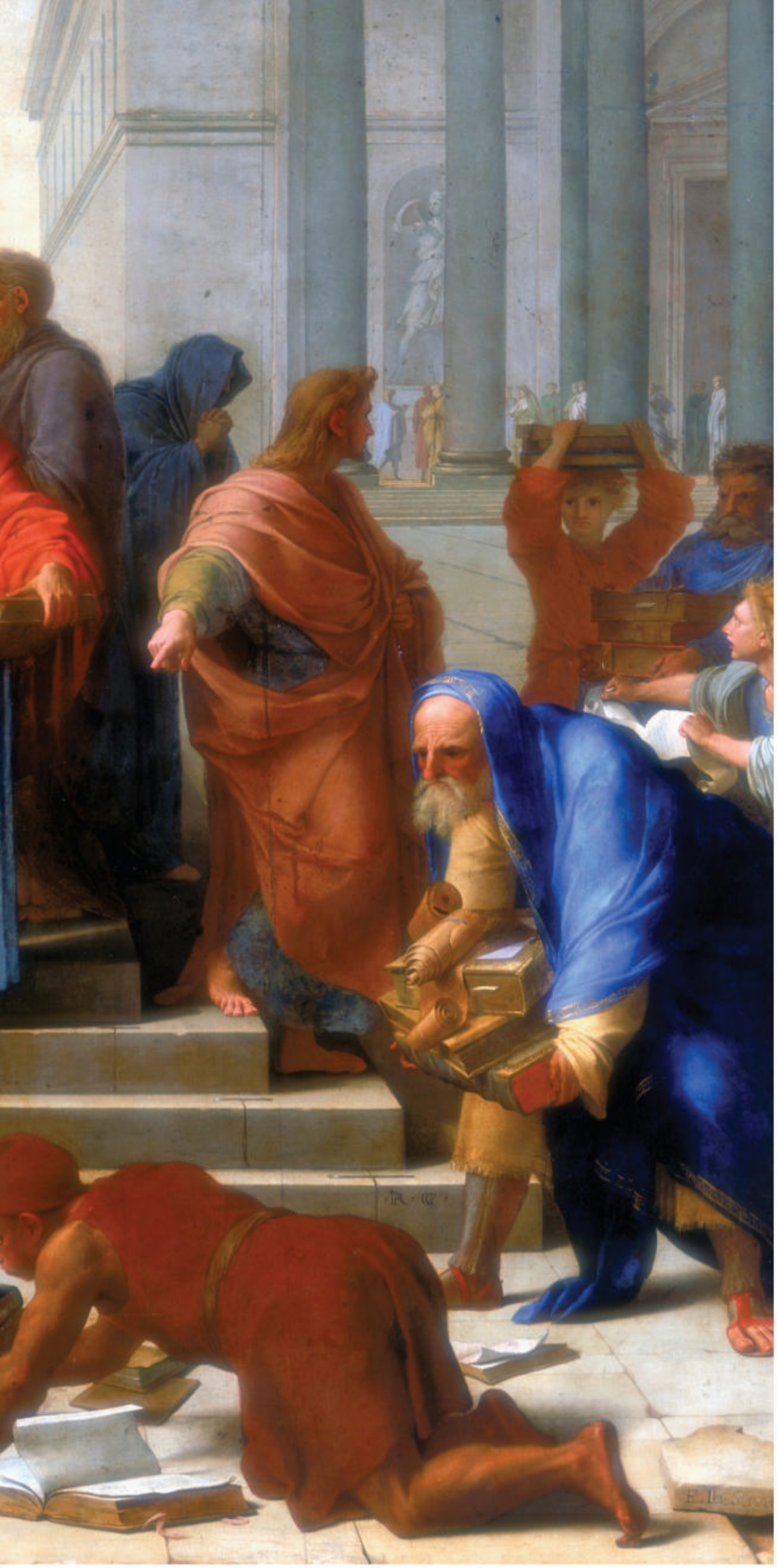
He extends the reach of the gospel far beyond its roots in Israel, in the process becoming the first great articulator of the faith.

Christianity might never have become an established faith without the efforts of Paul of Tarsus. (He is called both Saul and Paul—the names are interchangeable—but as his ministry proceeds he is most frequently called Paul, the Roman version of Saul.) The Book of Acts recounts his remarkable conversion on the road to Damascus. Prior to this trip, he had been a devout Jew and a zealous persecutor of Christians, whose faith demanded that he stamp out this dangerous new sect. His mission in Damascus is to find and arrest a group of Christians who were said to be spreading their gospel in the region. But while on the way, Paul is suddenly surrounded by a blindingly bright light “from heaven,” followed by a loud voice demanding of him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The narrative continues: “He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’” Completely blind, Paul is led by the hand into the city. “For three days he was without sight, and neither ate or drank,” until the appearance of Ananias, who is directed by the Lord to go to Paul, lay his hands on him and tell him, “The Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”



Greatly moved by the teachings of Paul, converts in Ephesus burned their books of magic—estimated to be worth “fifty thousand silver coins.”

The rest of the Book of Acts is filled with Paul’s travels all over the ancient world, preaching and converting and performing miracles in the name of Jesus. A faith that had been limited to the Jewish world is now being spread from Israel to Syria, to Greece, to Sicily, and all the way north to Rome. Along the way he is frequently beaten, imprisoned

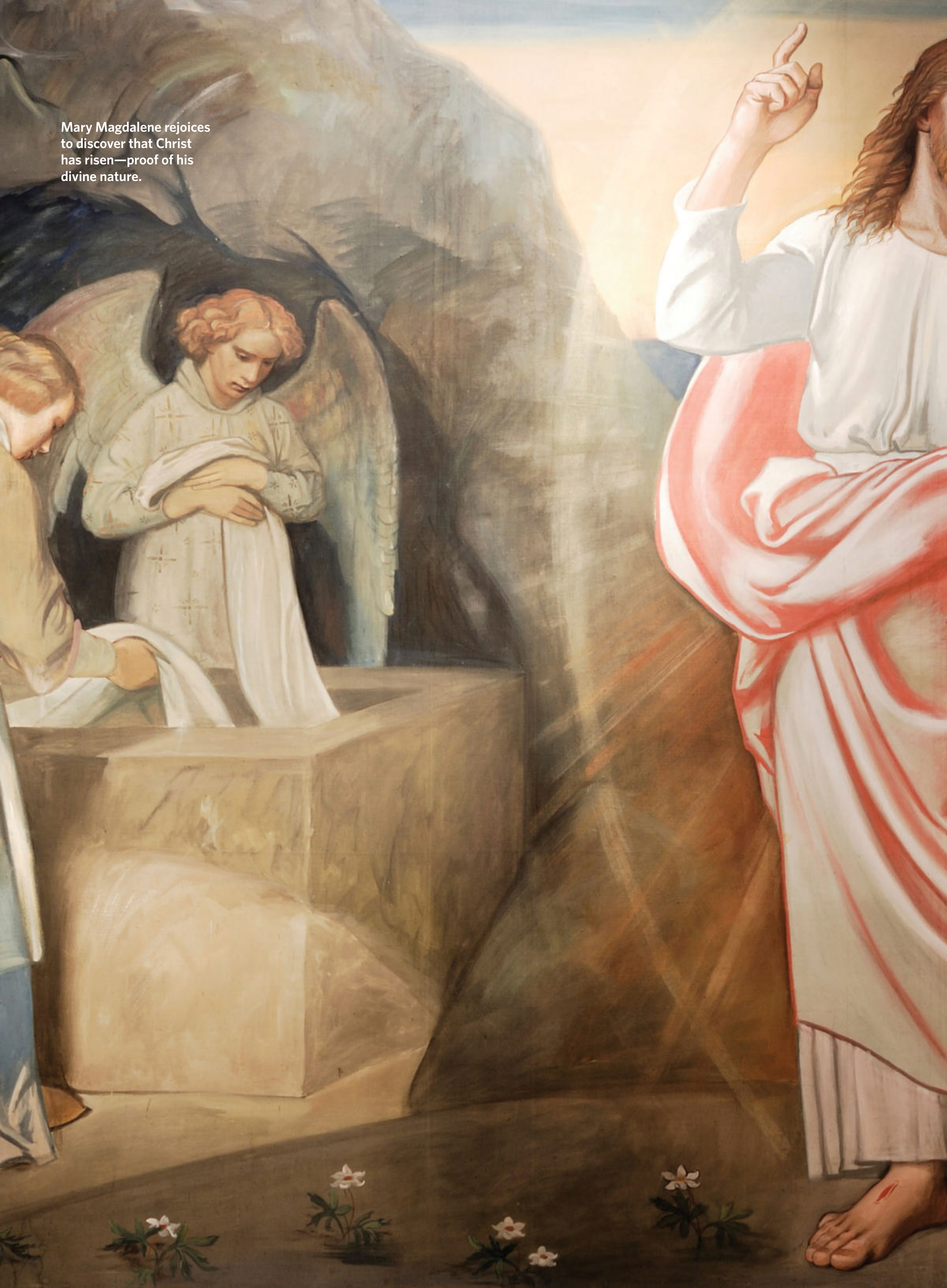


> ***"The Lord answered… 'I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light.'"***
>
> *ACTS 26:15, 17*

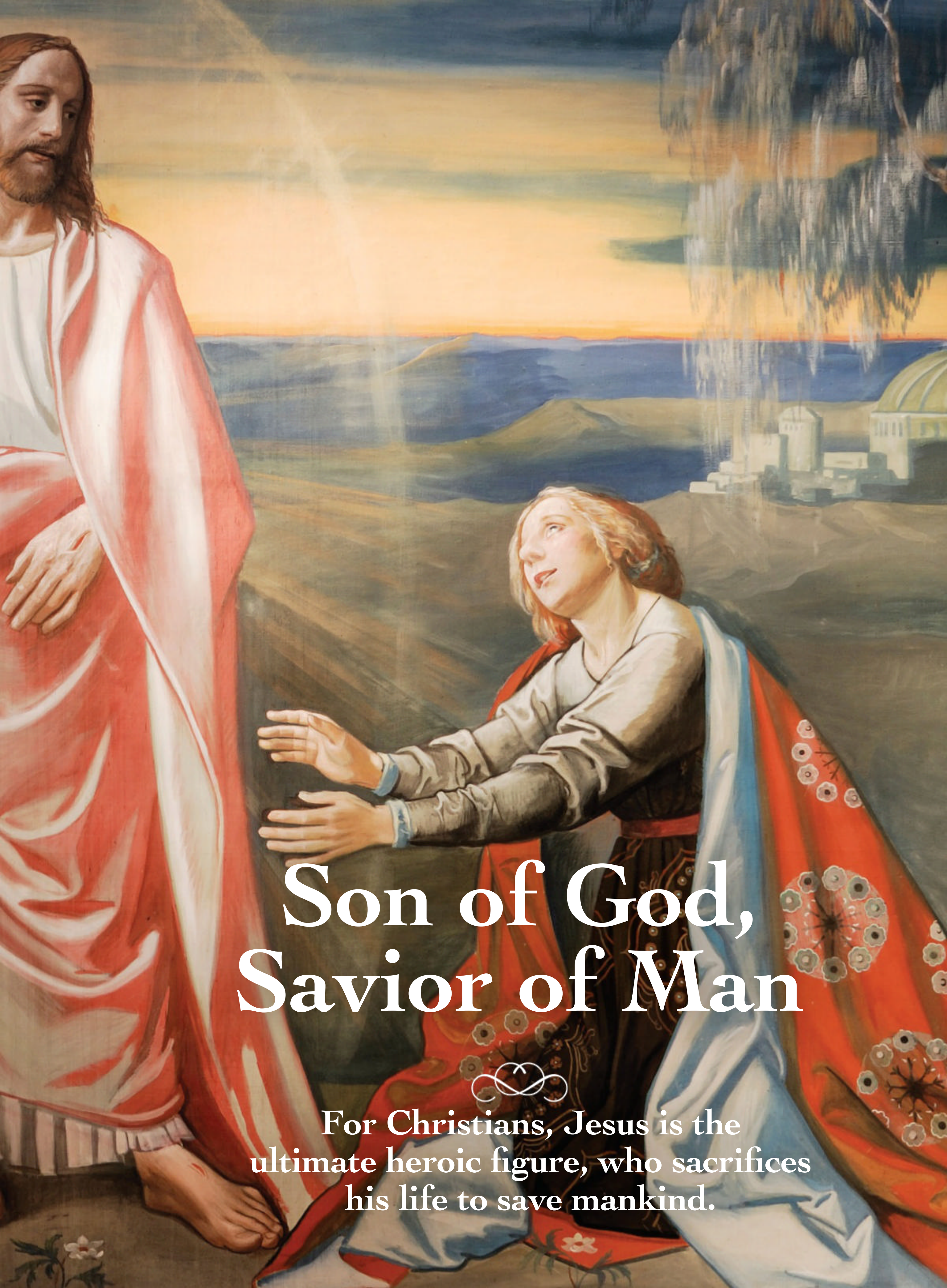
and tortured for his faith, but still he keeps on spreading the word, encouraging his fellow believers to pursue the "Way," as he described the faithful Christian life.

Were we only to know of Paul through the documented record of Acts, he would surely qualify as one of Christianity's greatest heroes, but we also have his remarkably articulate letters to the early Christian communities, which helped define the faith for the believers of his day and for the many Christians who came after him. In this sense, Paul was quite literally the first Christian theologian, and his thinking has profoundly influenced virtually every interpreter of the faith since his time. Much of his writing is concerned with specific controversies bedeviling the early communities in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus, but in articulating his response to these issues, he also developed fundamental precepts of the faith. Most notable among these, perhaps, is the notion of "justification by faith," which suggests that as believers ever subject to sin, we are bound to fail again and again in our efforts to live a virtuous life, and hence can never "earn" God's grace, but must only receive it gratefully with a loving and faithful heart.

Paul presents himself throughout his writing as a humble servant, one lacking charisma or an impressive physical presence. But he does so in part as a means to combat factions in the emerging churches developing around so-called "super-apostles"—first-century celebrity preachers, with good looks, powerful speaking voices, etc. Any believers who present themselves as such, Paul suggests, are distorting the essence of Jesus' teachings, which were unfailingly egalitarian—lifting no believer over any other—and completely dismissive of individual judgments based on worldly standards of wealth or looks or social status. Without Paul's careful stewardship of these early communities, there is no telling what direction the church might have taken in the first centuries after Jesus. Hero, indeed.

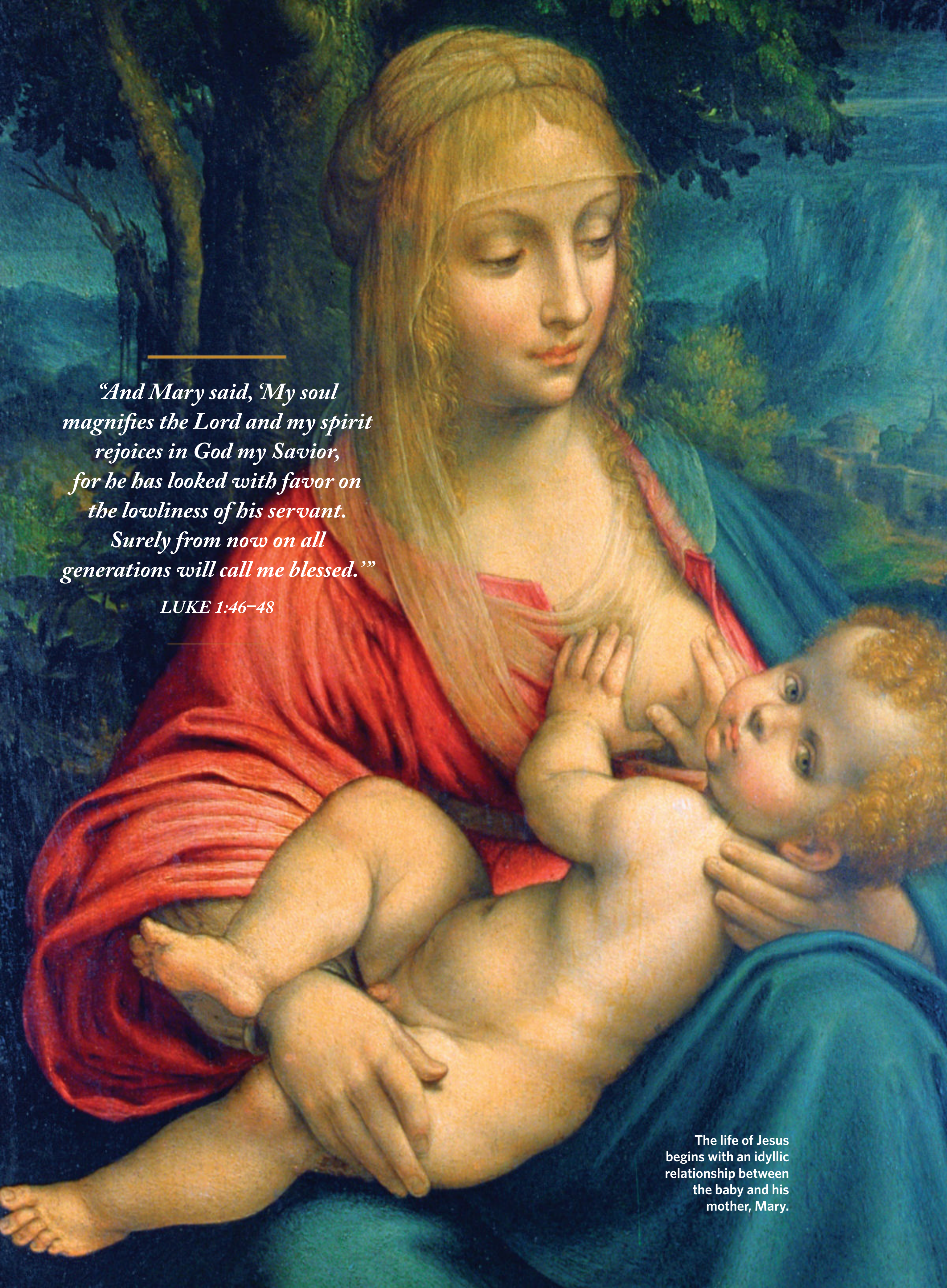


Mary Magdalene rejoices to discover that Christ has risen—proof of his divine nature.



Son of God, Savior of Man

For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate heroic figure, who sacrifices his life to save mankind.



> *"And Mary said, 'My soul*
> *magnifies the Lord and my spirit*
> *rejoices in God my Savior,*
> *for he has looked with favor on*
> *the lowliness of his servant.*
> *Surely from now on all*
> *generations will call me blessed.'"*
>
> *LUKE 1:46–48*

The life of Jesus begins with an idyllic relationship between the baby and his mother, Mary.

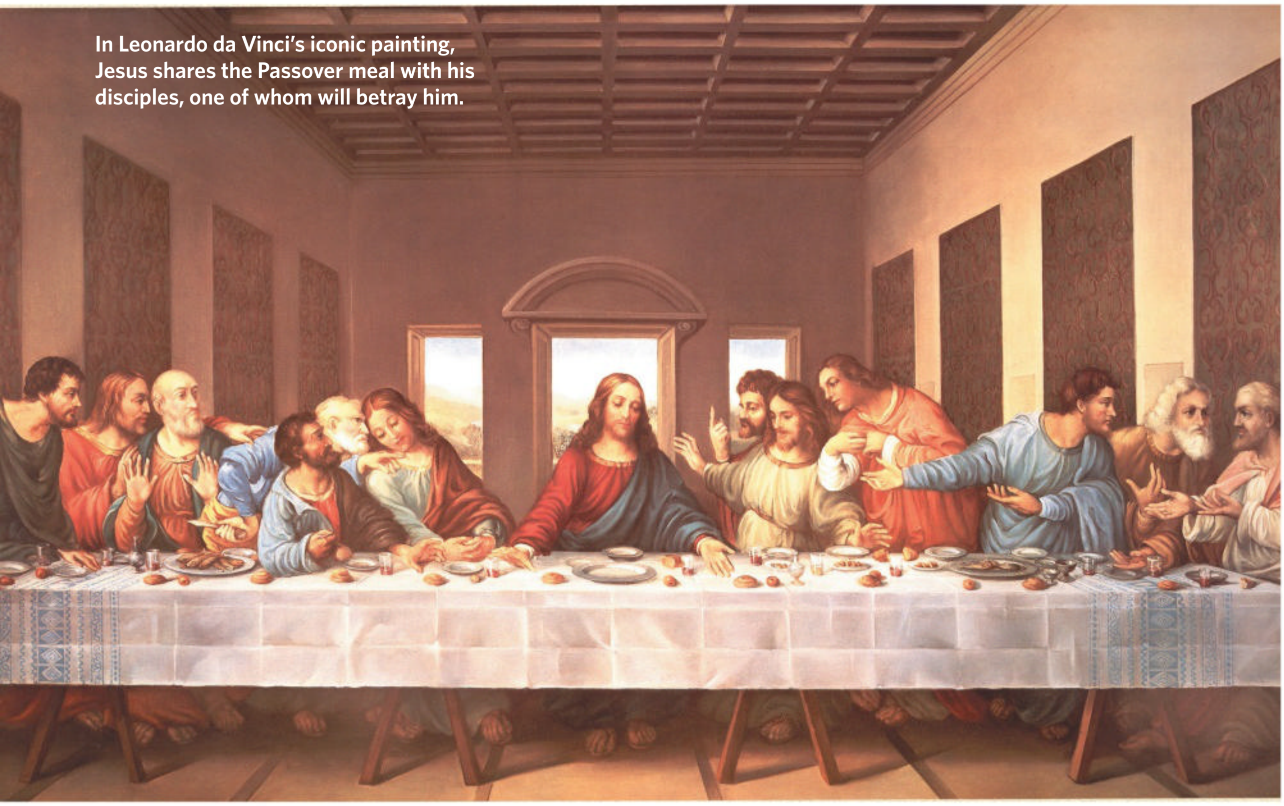
Jesus

Most Holy Redeemer

Savior and Lord, he has remained a source of solace and strength for Christians for two millennia.

For millions of believers the world over, Jesus is so much more than a hero. Including him here is in no way to suggest that he should be considered on a parallel plane with the other figures, but simply to note that excluding him from a list of the most notable people in the Bible would be an even greater disservice. The story of his life is well known, but which details receive the most emphasis depends on one's theological point of view. For some, including many of our nation's Founding Fathers, Jesus was a moral exemplar, a man who demonstrated more than any other the ethics of love and forgiveness. His radical commandments to love your enemy and forgive those who have sinned against you "not seven times, but seven times seventy times" offer a paradigm for human society dramatically opposed to the more judgmental, legalistic mores of his time—and ours as well. People in this camp are inclined to focus on Jesus' social ethics, his welcome embrace of the poor, the downtrodden and the rejected. His famous tale of the Good Samaritan, who stops and gives aid to a seriously injured stranger while the established religious figures of the day sprint to the other side of the road to avoid him, is significant not only because it rejects the emphasis on social observance and status (at the expense of kindness) but also because the hero of the story is a Samaritan, a member of an ethnic group looked down upon by the polite society of Israel. Similarly, his Sermon on the Mount, so full of reversals—poor over rich, meek over proud, peacemakers over the violent, persecuted over persecutors, merciful over merciless—presents Jesus as standing with precisely those members of society normally seen as being of lower status. And when he espouses an ethic of unconditional love—even for those who persecute you—and extreme nonviolence ("turn the other cheek"), he is challenging the society of his time as well as the society we inhabit today in very radical ways indeed. Proponents of this Jesus are focused on the "fully human" side of the traditional Christian doctrine, which describes Jesus as "fully divine and fully human."

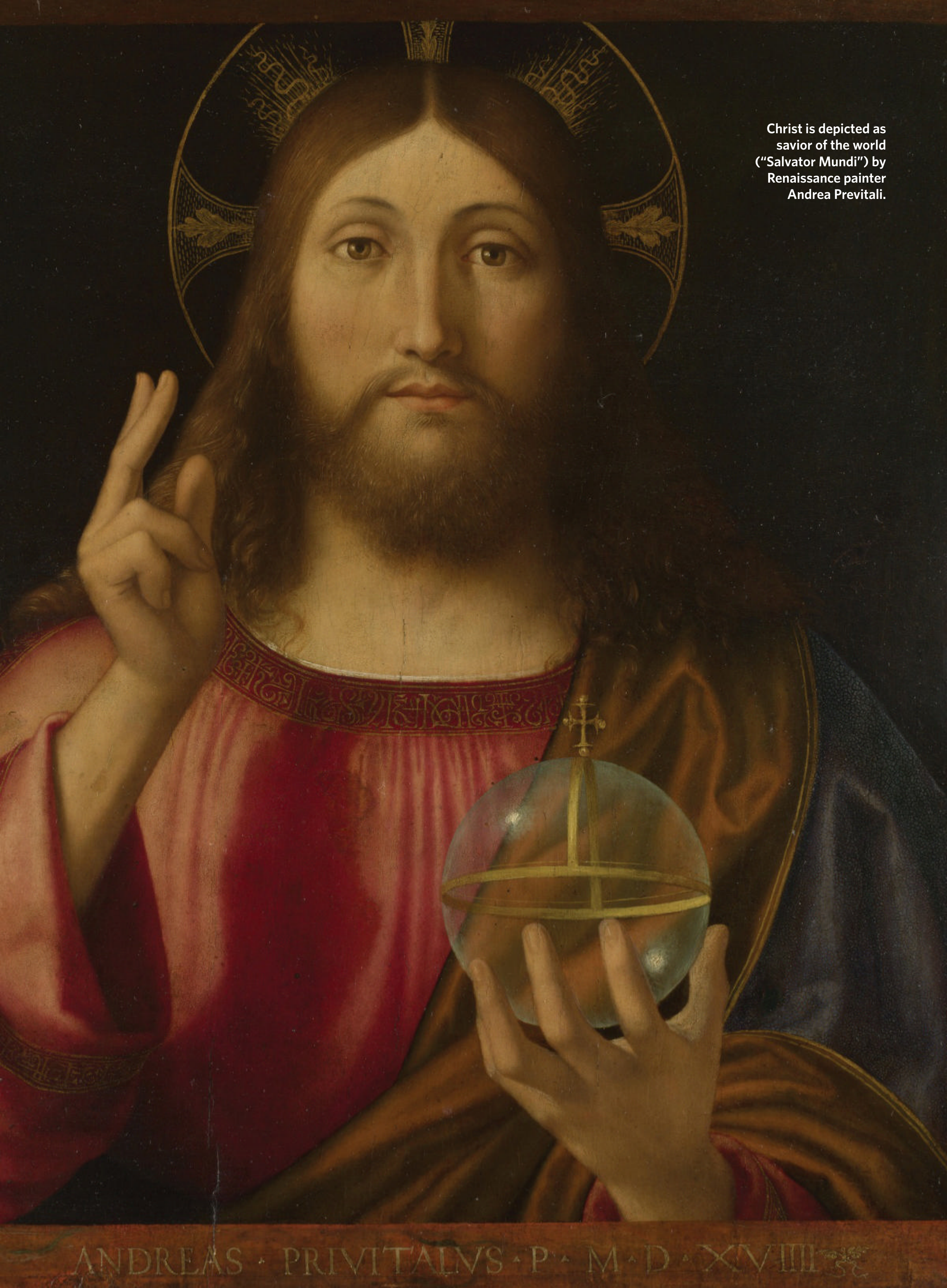
The most devout Christians, of course, recognize the importance of his ethical teachings, but place equal or greater emphasis on the "fully divine" side of Jesus, on Jesus as the Christ, who came to earth to save humanity from its sins and offer life abundant and everlasting. As presented in the Nicene Creed, which is intoned in churches all over the world: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God



In Leonardo da Vinci's iconic painting, Jesus shares the Passover meal with his disciples, one of whom will betray him.

> ***"When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have desired to eat the Passover with you before I suffer.'"***
>
> ***LUKE 22:14–15***

of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made." These believers focus on Jesus as the Son of God, whose story is commemorated throughout the liturgical year: his miraculous birth to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem, his introduction as a young boy in the temple, where he astounds the rabbis and priests with his knowledgeable interpretation of Scripture, his itinerant preaching throughout the countryside, where he performs miracles, heals the sick, and even raises the dead, and then his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Finally, the story reaches its climax in the events of Holy Week, beginning with the celebration of Passover with his disciples in what came to be known as the Last Supper, followed by his long, dark night of doubt in the Garden of Gethsemane, then his betrayal by Judas, one of his own disciples, and finally his arrest and eventual Crucifixion, as horrifying an end as anyone could ever experience. But, of course, the cross is not the final word; when a group of women go to his tomb to prepare him for burial, they find the stone that had been covering the entrance rolled away, and the tomb empty. "While they were perplexed about this," the Gospel of Luke reports, "suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.'" This final, most dramatic confounding of expectations in a life full to overflowing with such surprises, is for Christians the ultimate expression of faith, declaring once and for all that love will triumph over hate. From this remarkable life, an entire faith will spring and spread across the globe. "Who do you say I am?" Jesus asks his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. It is a question believers and nonbelievers alike have struggled with since his brief time on earth. For millions of Christians, Peter's answer is the final word: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."



ANDREAS · PRIVITALVS · P · M · D · XVIIII

Christ is depicted as savior of the world ("Salvator Mundi") by Renaissance painter Andrea Previtali.

HEROES OF THE BIBLE

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FROM SCRIPTURE

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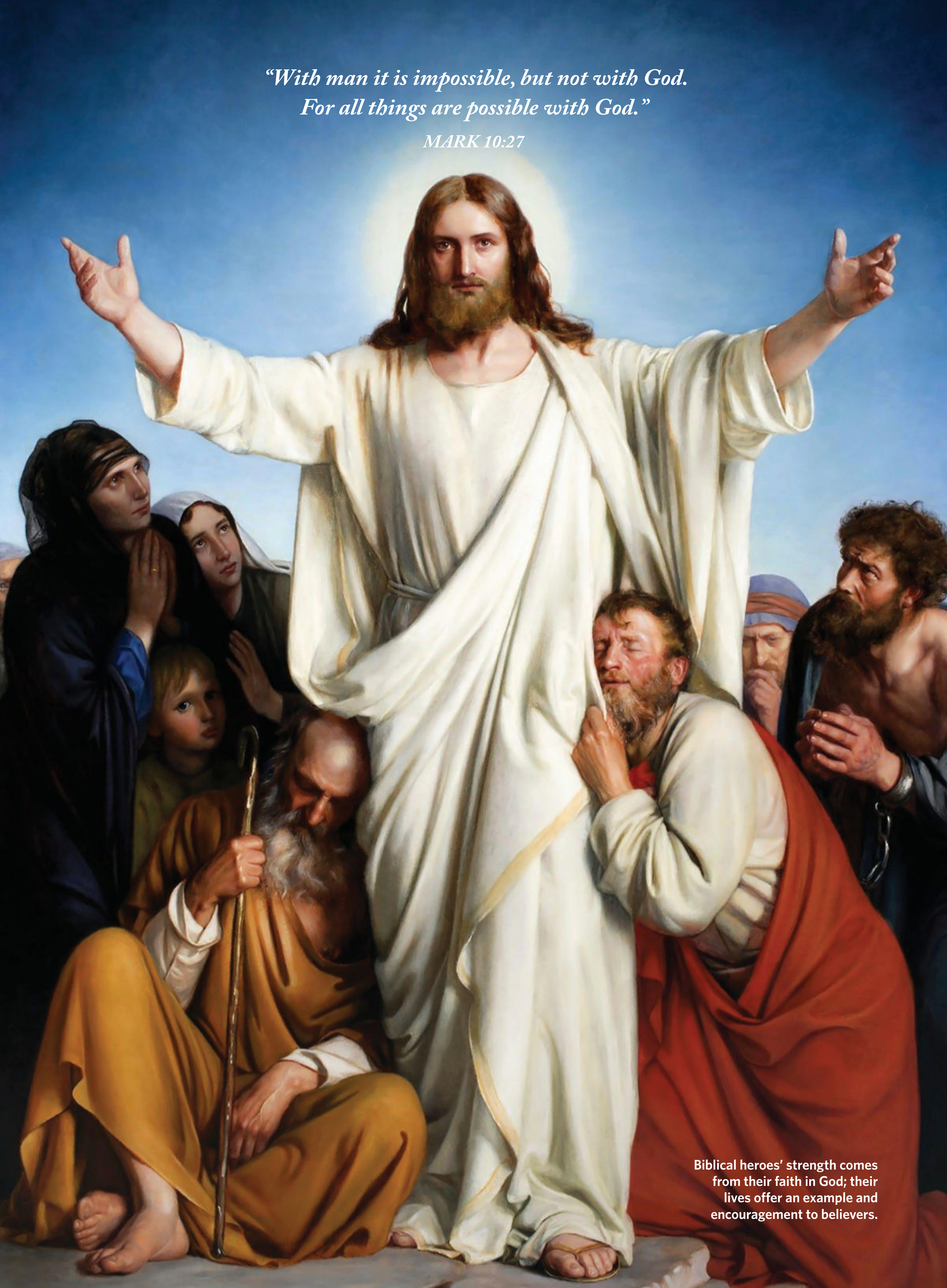
IN·HONOREM·PRINCIPIS·APOST·PAVLVS·V·BVRGHESIVS·ROMANVS·PON

The altar of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is said to be located directly over the saint's final resting place.



"With man it is impossible, but not with God.
For all things are possible with God."

MARK 10:27

Biblical heroes' strength comes from their faith in God; their lives offer an example and encouragement to believers.